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Bronze coin with the portrait of Helena and the legend FL. HELENA AUGUSTA, minted in Trier. The reverse shows a *Securitas* and the legend SECURITAS REIPUBLICE (see *RIC* VII, Trier 508, p. 212).

HELENA AUGUSTA

*The Mother of Constantine the Great
and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*

BY

JAN WILLEM DRIJVERS



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	VII
Abbreviations	VIII
Introduction	1

PART ONE: HISTORY

I. Helena's life before the reign of Constantine	9
II. Trier and Rome	21
III. Helena's conversion	35
IV. Helena's position at the court of Constantine	39
V. Helena's pilgrimage	55
VI. Helena's death	73

PART TWO: LEGEND

I. The Helena legend	79
II. The Cross in the fourth century	81
III. The development of the Helena legend	95
IV. The sources of the Helena legend	119
V. The <i>Vita Constantini</i> as a source for the Helena legend	125
VI. The construction of the Helena legend	131
VII. The Protonike legend	147
VIII. The Judas Cyriacus legend	165
Epilogue	181
Appendix. Portraits of Helena	189
Principal sources	195
Bibliography	197
General index	213

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Groningen, January 1991

Jan Willem Drijvers

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i>
<i>ASS</i>	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i>
<i>BABesch</i>	<i>Bulletin Antieke Beschaving</i>
<i>BHG</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca</i>
<i>BHL</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina</i>
<i>BHO</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum</i>
<i>CIG</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>CSCO</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>CSHB</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae</i>
<i>CTh</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>GCS</i>	<i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte</i>
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>ILCV</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres</i> (ed. E. Diehl, Berlin, 1925-1931)
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i> (ed. H. Dessau, Berlin, 1892-1916)
<i>JbAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>Kl. Pauly</i>	<i>Der Kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike in 5 Bänden</i>
<i>Lib. Pont.</i>	<i>Liber Pontificalis</i> (ed. L. Duchesne)
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> (ed. J.-P. Migne)
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> (ed. J.-P. Migne)
<i>PLRE</i>	<i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i> (Cambridge 1971-1980)
<i>PO</i>	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
<i>RAC</i>	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>RE</i>	<i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Pauly/Wissowa)
<i>REL</i>	<i>Revue des Études Latines</i>
<i>RHE</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique</i>
<i>RIC</i>	<i>Roman Imperial Coinage</i>
<i>ROC</i>	<i>Revue de l'Orient Chrétien</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>
<i>Vig. Christ.</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>

INTRODUCTION

This book is about Flavia Iulia Helena Augusta, mother of Constantine the Great, discoverer of the Cross, foundress of churches, saint of the universal church, ideal Christian empress and even the heroine of a novel.¹ Helena Augusta escaped anonymity for two principal reasons. Firstly, she was the mother of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor (306-337). By tolerating and propagating Christianity, Constantine gave the first impetus to the christianization of the Roman Empire, which eventually led to a Christian Europe. Helena was involved in Constantine's policy of christianization and thus irrevocably connected with the christianization of the world, and for this reason she has remained known to posterity. Secondly, Helena became famous for her leading role in the popular legend of the finding of the True Cross. This legend relates how Helena travelled to Jerusalem to search for the Cross of Christ, and how she found three crosses, one of which was identified as that of Christ.

The story of Helena's discovery of the Cross originated only some fifty years after her death and must therefore be regarded as historical fiction. However, in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages the legend was thought to represent historical reality, with the result that Helena became extremely popular.

When, however, a historical figure becomes the principal figure of a legend, there is a great danger that the historical and unhistorical, the factual and the legendary, become intertwined. As a result, historical fact and historical fiction can no longer be distinguished. This is exactly what happened in the case of Helena. It was believed in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and even in modern times that Helena had indeed found the Cross of Christ,² especially since the story was given the aura of historicity through its inclusion in the *Historiae Ecclesiasticae* of the fifth century. Edward Gibbon was one of the first historians who, because of the silence of contemporary sources like Eusebius and the Bordeaux pilgrim, regarded the finding of the Cross by Helena to be historical fiction.³ Although Gibbon's assessment is quite right, it

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Helena*, London 1950.

² E.g. C. Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, Cologne 1609, vol. 3, 394ff.; Tillemont, *Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire Ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles*, Brussels 1732 (2nd. ed.), VII, 291, Note II.

³ E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ed. by J.B. Bury (10th. ed.), vol. II, 455-456,

was still difficult for many to reject the legend as an unreliable historical source. The clergymen who published about Helena were particularly at fault here, never strictly separating historical data from legendary material.⁴ While clergymen may be excused for this since Helena was a saint of the Church, professional historians cannot escape such a serious charge. From these we expect a clear distinction between fact and fiction, but this is, unfortunately, not always what we find. In a book on Constantine by a famous ancient historian first published in 1969 and reprinted unaltered in 1987, there is a passage on Helena in which both fact and fiction are presented as of equal historical value:

Wherever she passed she distributed gifts—to some, silver, to some, clothes. She amnestied convicts and exiles and worshipped in the churches; {she sought out the company of nuns to do them honor}, and the poor, to relieve their distress. But she was, beyond this, the first pilgrim. {She had been told in a dream to look for the site of the Holy Sepulcher, and succeeded in finding it, hidden under a mound of earth and a shrine of Aphrodite. With the discovery of the Holy Sepulcher, the True Cross was found also...}⁵

The parts which I have placed between brackets are derived from the legend of Helena's discovery of the Cross and have therefore no historical value at all, at least according to the strictest definition of historical fact. Most of the rest of the passage is derived from Helena's contemporary Eusebius, and although the historical value of his work is sometimes difficult to assess, the picture he presents of Helena probably comes closer to historical 'truth'.

In general, the 'historical' picture of Helena presented in modern historiography is still confused by the unhistorical legend. This picture therefore needs the clarification afforded by a strict separation of historical and legendary material. That is the main aim of this book, which is consequently presented in two parts. In the first part an attempt is made to present something like a

n.66: "The silence of Eusebius and the Bordeaux pilgrim, which satisfies those who think, perplexes those who believe."

⁴ Especially R. Couzard, 1911, has fact and fiction ingeniously intertwined, although the title *Sainte Hélène d'après l'Histoire et la Tradition* leads one to suspect otherwise. J. Maurice in the introduction of his *Sainte Hélène* (Paris 1930), which is about representations of Helena in art, also does not separate historical and legendary information properly. Much better in this respect is A.-M. Rouillon, 1908, although it is more about Constantine than about Helena. Rather superficial is H.H. Lauer, 1967. Very good is the second chapter of E.D. Hunt's book (1982), entitled: 'Helena — History and Legend'.

⁵ R. MacMullen, 1987², 187-188.

biography of Helena based on historically reliable data, i.e. non-legendary material, while in the second part the legend is treated. Unfortunately, lack of information in the sources makes it impossible to write a full biography of Helena. There are long periods of her life, especially before the reign of Constantine, about which nothing is known. We are rather better informed about the later years of her life. Her position at Constantine's court can be established, as well as her attitude towards Christianity. As far as we know, the most important event of her life was definitely her 'pilgrimage', which was described by Eusebius. It was this journey to Palestine which caused the discovery of the True Cross to be ascribed to her many years later.

The sources available for reconstructing Helena's life are scanty. Apart from inscriptions, there are no contemporary written sources. This means we have to turn to sources written after, sometimes even a long time after Helena had died. The most important source for Helena's life is the *Vita Constantini* (VC) of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine (c.260/65-c.339). This 'biography' of Constantine was written shortly after Constantine's death in 337 and some ten years after Helena had died. Eusebius dedicates paragraphs 42-47 of Book III to Helena's journey in 327/28 to the eastern provinces of the empire and especially to her stay in Palestine. Unfortunately, Eusebius does not give any information about Helena's life before her journey. It may be that her earlier life was of no interest to Eusebius, or that he simply had no information about her activities in the western part of the empire, where, as far as is known, Helena spent most of her life. It is remarkable that Eusebius is silent about her in the last edition of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, probably dating from 324,⁶ which contains important additions about Constantine's reign. But there are reasons for Eusebius to mention her journey and her stay in Palestine. As metropolitan bishop of Palestine, Eusebius no doubt accompanied her on her travels through his province. Helena was an important person in the Roman Empire of her day and deserved proper attention. But most important of all for Eusebius in his VC were Helena's beneficial activities towards the Church and Christianity in general. Eusebius was not primarily interested in the personal lives of people but in their attitude towards Christianity. This is why Helena was important to Eusebius: during her stay in Palestine she gave support to the Christian

⁶ T.D. Barnes, 1980.

communities there and to the Church in general. This attitude applies to the *VC* in general. Eusebius described Constantine's life because he considered him the protector and supporter of Christianity. In consequence Constantine and his activities, as well as those of Helena, are only perceived and described from a purely Christian perspective. Events or activities which are not important with regard to Christianity or which would discredit Constantine as a Christian emperor are simply left out.⁷ It was therefore not Eusebius' intention to compose a historical biography of Constantine, but to reveal the special position of Constantine and "to relate his actions to the march of Christian providence."⁸

The fact that Eusebius in his *VC* sketched a one-sided and favourable picture of Constantine's reign has caused the *Vita* to be regarded as an unreliable historical source. In the last century Jacob Burckhardt in particular criticized Eusebius severely and even accused him of falsifying history.⁹ The *VC* is obviously a eulogy of Constantine's reign and his pro-Christian policy, but that does not mean that the *VC* should be put aside as a historically unreliable and hence useless source. It is exactly because Eusebius' intentions in writing his biography of Constantine are known, that the *VC* can very well be used as a source, if with a certain caution.

Eusebius' idea of historiography, i.e. writing from a Christian perspective, was taken over by all Christian authors. As a consequence Christian sources, i.e. the fifth-century *Church Histories*, do not contain much historical information about Helena's life but do include all the more legendary material. Still these sources contain information useful for the reconstruction of Helena's life. Other information can be gleaned from the so-called 'minor Roman historians', such as Aurelius Victor, Eutropius and Zosimus, as well as from various other historiographical sources like, for instance, the various *Chronicles* and the *Liber Pontificalis*. Apart from written sources, epigraphic, numismatic and archaeological remains provide information which helps convey an impression of Helena's life. Helena, however, became famous not for her life, but for the

⁷ A clear example of this is Eusebius' silence about the killing of Crispus and Fausta in 326 on the order of Constantine; see below pp. 60–63.

⁸ Av. Cameron, 1983, 86; see also *ibid.* 82 and 85.

⁹ J. Burckhardt, 1898³, 326: "Constantins Andenken hat in der Geschichte das grösste denkbare Unglück gehabt ... er ist in die Hände des widerlichsten aller Lobredner gefallen, der sein Bild durch und durch verfälscht hat. Es ist Euseb von Cäsarea und sein 'Leben Constantins' gemeint." Apart from the fact that the *VC* was not considered a useful source, it has also been doubted whether Eusebius was indeed its author; see H. Grégoire, 1938. Nowadays there are no longer any doubts regarding Eusebius' authorship of the *VC*.

legend which ascribed to her the discovery of the cross on which Christ had died.

The second part of this book is about the legend of the discovery of the Cross,¹⁰ and deals with its origin and development, as well as its diffusion and function until the middle of the fifth century. By that time three versions of the legend had already developed. The legend is first attested in Ambrose's funeral oration in honour of Theodosius the Great, some seventy years after Helena's death. The story spread rapidly from the end of the fourth century onwards. It became known not only in Greek and Latin, but also in Syriac, Coptic, Georgian, and several vernacular languages.¹¹ Until deep into the Middle Ages the legend remained a very popular story which was also represented in the visual arts.¹² Because the spread of the legend is geographically, chronologically and linguistically very diverse and complex, it is impossible to present in the context of this study a complete picture of its development and distribution from its origins until modern times. This study is therefore geographically restricted to the territory of the Roman Empire of Late Antiquity, linguistically to the oldest versions of the legend in Greek, Latin and Syriac, and chronologically to the period of origin of the legend — the second half of the fourth century — until c. 450, by which date the

¹⁰ In the study of literary theory no satisfying definition of the term legend has so far been formulated. Generally a legend is considered to be a religious text in prose which tells about a Christian saint and the miracles he/she performed, or which happened to him/her through the intervention of God. Legends are not historical accounts; they are fiction. However, a legend is almost always based on a historical event, although it may have completely faded into the background or even completely vanished for the sake of non-historical and fantastically devised narrative elements which were added to the legend in the course of time. A legend is therefore the product of imagination. It is generally held that the function of a legend is to explain things and to give a meaning to things. Although the legend of the discovery of the Cross contains historical elements and is perhaps based on a historical event, i.e. the finding in Jerusalem of a piece of wood considered to be the Cross of Christ, the main outlines of the legendary account are pure fiction. See for legends e.g. B. Altaner, 1950; H. Delahaye, 1955; M. Lüthi 1981; H. Rosenfeld, 1982; F. Karlinger, 1986.

¹¹ As far as I know, no complete survey of all known legends in the various languages exists, but see e.g. F. Holthausen, 1905, 1-4 and M. van Esbroeck, 1979. A Coptic legend about Eudoxia and the Holy Sepulchre is derived from the legend of the discovery of the Cross; see H.A. Drake, 1979 and H.A. Drake *et al.*, 1980.

¹² The legend was included under the title *De Inventione Sanctae Crucis* in the *Legenda Aurea*, a collection of popular legends compiled in the thirteenth century by Jacobus de Voragine. For the legend in visual arts, see J. Maurice, 1930; *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, Bd. 6, 485-490; H.H. Lauer, 1967, 38-44; K.A. Wiegel, 1971; C. Ginzburg, 1981/82, esp. ch. 2 on the frescoes of Piero della Francesca in Arezzo.

legend had reached its fully developed form and had already been widely distributed.

By the middle of the fifth century three versions of the legend had developed, all three named after their principal characters:

1. the Helena legend (H)
2. the Protonike legend (P)
3. the Judas Cyriacus legend (C)

The place and date of origin of the legends, their development and (changing) function, as well as the interrelationship of the three versions will be discussed. The increasing importance of the Cross as Christian symbol and as relic is also closely related to the legend of the discovery of the Cross. Therefore this discussion of the legends will be preceded by a paragraph on the importance of the Cross in the fourth century and the question of its discovery.

PART ONE

HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

HELENA'S LIFE BEFORE THE REIGN OF CONSTANTINE

It is generally assumed that Helena was born in Drepanum (modern Herkes) in Bithynia (Asia Minor). In most secondary literature this is accepted as established fact based on evidence supplied by Procopius, who lived two centuries after Helena. In his *Aedificia*, Procopius states that Constantine changed the name of Drepanum to Helenopolis because his mother Helena was born there.¹ It is worth noting that Procopius does not refer to Drepanum as Helena's place of origin as an absolute fact. It was actually only public opinion that associated her with Drepanum: *ἐκ ταύτης γὰρ τὴν Ἑλένην ὠρμησθαί φασι*. Obviously no unequivocal certainty existed in the sixth century about Helena's birthplace. Procopius describes Helenopolis as an insignificant place not adorned by Constantine with buildings worthy of the birthplace of an empress-mother. It was Justinian who made an important town of Helenopolis. He was responsible for the repair of the water-supply, for the construction of a new public bath and for the restoration of another. Furthermore, he built there churches, stoas and magistrates' quarters. In Procopius' opinion, Justinian and not Constantine made Helenopolis into an important and prosperous city. All his efforts, however, were to no avail. Despite improvements the town in time fell again into disrepair.²

It can be accepted as fact that Constantine renamed Drepanum Helenopolis. Ammianus Marcellinus speaks of *Drepanum ante, nunc Helenopolim*.³ Eusebius remarks that at the end of his life Constantine fell ill in the city Helenopolis, named after his mother Helena.⁴ Socrates states that Constantine refounded Drepanum and named it Helenopolis after Helena. He adds that on this occasion the status of the place was heightened: it was promoted from *κώμη* to *πόλις*.⁵ Sozomen is less clear. He does indeed note that a city in Bithynia was named by Constantine after Helena to perpetuate

¹ *Aedif.* V ii, 1-5. According to Justinian, *Novella* 28.1, also the province Helenopontus was named after Helena.

² The fourteenth-century Byzantine writer Johannes Glykys calls Helenopolis 'a piteous city'; see *RE*, Band 5, s.v. Drepanon 4.

³ *Amm. Marc.* 26.8.1.

⁴ *VC* IV 61.

⁵ *Hist. Eccl.* I 49 = *PG* 67, 124.

her memory, but he also mentions another Helenopolis in Palestine.⁶

Other sources unfortunately add a difficulty in the figure of the Christian martyr Lucian,⁷ who is mentioned in those passages which deal with the renaming of Drepanum. The *Chronicle* of Jerome mentions that in 327 Drepanum was made a *civitas* by Constantine in honour of Lucian and that it was renamed after Helena.⁸ Similarly according to the *Chronicon Paschale*, Drepanum was repaired by Constantine in honour of Lucian and thereupon named Helenopolis after his mother; at the same time the place became a *civitas* and received the privilege of freedom from taxes.⁹ Theophanes says exactly the same.¹⁰ According to Philostorgius, Helenopolis was founded by Helena herself. The choice of the site for the new city was determined by the presence of the burial place of Lucian. For reasons unknown Lucian, who died in Nicomedia, was buried in Drepanum. Helena held Drepanum in high esteem because of the presence there of Lucian's grave and relics.¹¹

What is the nature of this connection which the sources clearly indicate between Helena and Lucian? Lucian had been a priest in the church of Antioch and a teacher of theology. Eusebius of Nicomedia and in all probability Arius, the Alexandrian priest after whom the Arian doctrine was named, had been his pupils. Besides, Lucian had published an edition of the Septuagint which, according to Jerome, was widely used in Asia Minor and Syria.¹² Lucian's career is obscure from lack of information but it is certain that he had been a priest in Antioch for many years and that

⁶ *Hist. Eccl.* II 2,5. A Helenopolis in *Palestina secunda* is mentioned only in one other source (Hierocles, *Synecdemos* = PG 113, 153); see E. Honigmann, 1939, 42-43. Honigmann conjectures a link between Palestinian Helenopolis and Helena's travels in Palestine. See also M. Kajava, 1985, 43.

⁷ On Lucian see G. Bardy, 1936; G. Downey, 1974³, 337-342.

⁸ *Ep. Chron.* 1023; also Jerome, *Chronicon* 2343 = *Chron. Min.* I, 450.

⁹ *Chron. Pasch.* 527: *Drepanam Bithyniae civitatem in honorem martyris Luciani ibi conditi Constantinus instaurans ex vocabulo matris suae Helenopolim nuncupavit.*

¹⁰ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 28, 3-4. Theophanes calls the place Drepana.

¹¹ Philostorgius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 12-13. Philostorgius used the *Vita Luciani* as source for his passages about Lucian; see J. Bidez, GCS 21, XCII-XCIV; CXLVII-CLI. According to this *vita*, Helena had paid special attention to the site where Lucian was buried by founding a city there which she named Helenopolis. A massive wall was built around the new city, and in honour of Lucian Helena endowed it with a grand sanctuary which could be seen from land as well as from sea (*Vita Luciani* 20 = J. Bidez, Philostorgius, *Kirchengeschichte*, GCS 21, Anhang VI, 184-201, 201,4ff.).

¹² Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 77; Jerome, *Praefat. in Paralip.* = PL 28, 1324. See G. Bardy, 1936, 164-177, for Lucian's edition of the Septuagint.

during the Great Persecution he was taken to Nicomedia, brought to trial and convicted by the Emperor Maximinus himself. He was executed on 7 January 303.¹³

On the basis of the information provided by Philostorgius it is assumed that Helena had a high regard for Lucian. T.D. Barnes even suggests that from Philostorgius' remarks we might deduce that Helena had heard Lucian preach in Nicomedia. This would have happened during the years Constantine stayed at the court of Diocletian, i.e. in the years c.293-305.¹⁴ Barnes seems to go too far on this point. His suggestion not only implies that Lucian actually had the freedom to speak in public, which is unlikely, but also that Helena stayed at the imperial court of Nicomedia. But we do not know that Helena accompanied Constantine to Nicomedia; in fact, the course of Helena's life in the years after her separation from Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, is obscure.

Nothing sensible can be said either about the nature of Helena's interest in Lucian or about possible contacts between the empress-mother and the Christian martyr. The only indisputable fact which can lead to the conclusion that Lucian and Helena might have had some contact is the changing of the name of Drepanum, where Lucian's corpse was buried, into Helenopolis. The date of the refounding and renaming of Drepanum is not without importance: it is the same date as that on which Lucian died a martyr's death, 7 January.¹⁵

No definite statement about Helena's place of birth can be made on basis of the above. The only direct evidence for Drepanum as Helena's birthplace is given by Procopius. However, Procopius is a relatively late source for the life of Helena, and it might well be that Procopius wanted to give an etymological explanation for the eponymic Helenopolis.¹⁶ The reason for

¹³ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* VIII 13,2; IX 6,2; IX 6,3. Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 77, mentions Lucian's execution in Nicomedia and his burial in Drepanum: *Passus est Nicomediae ob confessionem Christi sub persecutione Maximini sepulusque Helenopoli Bithyniae*. Jerome makes no mention of a connection between Helena and Helenopolis.

¹⁴ T.D. Barnes, 1981, 194: "... at Nicomedia, in the reign of Diocletian, Constantine and his mother may have been among those who heard Lucian teach and expound the Scriptures."

¹⁵ *Chron. Pasch.* 527. T.D. Barnes, 1982, 77, n.130, thinks the *Chron. Pasch.* is incorrect with regard to chronology. He connects the renaming of Drepanum with the death of Helena; because she was still alive in 327, the date must be 328, just after her death.

¹⁶ M. Kajava, 1985, 53.

renaming Drepanum Helenopolis must lie in the connection between Helena and Lucian, as indicated in the sources, however unclear this connection may be: Constantine had Drepanum refounded in honour of Lucian and gave it the name Helenopolis after his mother Helena, possibly on the occasion of her death.¹⁷

Attempts to come to a conclusion about Helena's birthplace on the basis of the origin of the proper name Helena have been of no avail. J. Vogt suggested that the name Helena was typical for the Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire and that therefore Helena's place of origin should be looked for in the eastern provinces.¹⁸ Epigraphical research, however, has revealed that the name Helena was also common in the Latin-speaking parts of the empire.¹⁹ Remarkably enough, these investigations have indicated that the name Helena is not epigraphically attested in Bithynia, Helena's proposed region of origin. This in spite of the existence of an Isis-Helena cult in this region.²⁰

Because of the lack of clarity about Helena's birthplace, other places besides Drepanum have been suggested: Naissus, Caphar Phacar in Mesopotamia, Edessa, Trier and even Colchester. As in the case of Drepanum, none of these places can be seriously considered Helena's place of origin.²¹

Apart from Helena's place of birth, her date of birth is also the subject of controversy. Eusebius relates that she died at the age of about eighty years, having made her last will in favour of her son and grandsons.²² This remark is of no value for the establishment of her year of birth unless we know in which year she died.

¹⁷ For the date of Helena's death, see below p. 73. *RE*, Suppl. III, 892-894, mentions two other places named after Helena: a *vicus* Helena in northern France and an *oppidum* Helena in the Pyrenees. There is discussion about the precise location of the *vicus*. It is probably located in the territory of the *Atrebates*, not far from modern Arras. The name of the *oppidum*, also denoted as *castrum* or *castellum*, was originally *Iliberri* or *Illiberri*. In 350 the Emperor Constans, a grandson of Helena, was murdered there (*Epitome de Caesaribus* 41,23). This corresponds with the prophecy, mentioned by Zonaras, *Epit. Hist.* XIII 6, which predicted that Constans would die in the arms of his grandmother. In the fourth century the *oppidum* Helena was an obscure place, but in the sixth century it became a cathedral city, probably with the status of *civitas*.

¹⁸ J. Vogt, 1976, 219.

¹⁹ M. Kajava, 1985, 48ff.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

²¹ *Origo Constantini* II 2; *Hist. Nest.* XVII = *PO* 4, 264; Hamra Ispahanens, 55; *ASS* Jan II, 13 Jan., 61; *ASS*, Aug. III, 18 Aug., 583; *ASS*, Aug. III, 18 Aug., 548. For the Helena-tradition in Trier, see below p. 21-30, and for the Helena-tradition in Britian, see F. Arnold-Forster, 1899, vol. I, 181-189.

²² *VC* III 46. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = *PG* 67, 121, and Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* II 2,4, also mention this ripe age in imitation of Eusebius.

Unfortunately, Eusebius makes no explicit remarks about the date of her death. But the paragraph in the *Vita Constantini* (VC) which describes her death follows immediately the paragraphs about her journey in Palestine and the eastern provinces of the Empire. Moreover, it is clear from VC III 42 and 43 that Helena, made her journey towards the end of her life and that she died soon afterwards.

Helena probably began her journey in the autumn of 326 or in the early spring of 327. It is known that after the spring of 329 no new coins bearing her portrait were minted.²³ This sudden break in the issue of Helena-coins must mark her death. If we assume that her journey had taken between one and a half and two years to complete and that she died shortly afterwards, then we can roughly date her death to 328 or to the first months of 329. If she was indeed then about eighty, she may have been born around 248.

Perhaps the date of her son's birth can be construed as another piece of evidence for Helena's birthdate. There is a longstanding dispute on his date of birth as well. J. Vogt dates it to c.285 on the basis of portraits on coins, which depict Constantine as a youthful emperor, and with reference to the panegyric of 307,²⁴ written and delivered on the occasion of the wedding of Constantine and Fausta, in which Constantine is described as an *adolescens*. Vogt also refers to a passage in the *Vita Constantini* where Constantine, passing through Palestine together with Diocletian in 300, is described as a youth barely out of his boyhood.²⁵ For Vogt these sources support the conclusion that Constantine cannot have been much more than twenty years old when he was proclaimed emperor in 306.²⁶ Others have tried to establish Constantine's date of birth with the help of a passage in the panegyric of 310.²⁷ Here there is a description of how at the shrine of Apollo Granus at Grand in Gaul Constantine was offered two laurel crowns, each symbolizing thirty years of life. The officiating priests express their hope that Constantine might surpass the age of Homer's Nestor. As we know from the *Iliad* (I 250), Nestor's life spanned more than two generations and he lived to more than ninety years of

²³ J. Maurice, 1901, 183; *RIC* VII, 72-7; M. Vodova, 1979. For a more extensive discussion about the date of her journey and the year of her death, see below, p. 73.

²⁴ *Pan. Lat.* VI 4-7.

²⁵ *VC* I 19.

²⁶ J. Vogt, 1943, 190-195.

²⁷ *Pan. Lat.* VII 21,4; see T.D. Barnes, 1981, 36.

age. As it was hoped that Constantine would live to beyond ninety and because the crowns each signify thirty years of life, it can be concluded that in 310 Constantine must have been older than thirty. This indicates a date of birth before 280.²⁸ However, since panegyrics are eulogies in which things are presented in an idealistic rather than in a realistic way — as is also the case with coins — they cannot always be used as reliable historical sources. The description or presentation of Constantine as an *adolescens* or an implicit specification of the age of the emperor, should be treated with caution.

There is a tendency in the historiography of the Constantinian period not to attach much value to terms such as *iuvenis* and *adolescens* as a qualification of Constantine's age. According to Barnes, it was part of imperial propaganda to present Constantine as a forceful and vigorous ruler by depicting him as a young man on coins and by describing him as a youth in the literary sources. In this respect, therefore, coins and narrative sources have little to do with reality. Barnes rejects proposals which date Constantine's birth between c.280 and 288. In his opinion, a late date of birth is not consistent with Constantine's many activities before his accession to the throne in 306.²⁹

Thus the problem still remains of how to establish Constantine's date of birth. Fortunately, there do exist sources more reliable than coins and panegyrics. One of these is Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*. The Bishop of Caesarea remarks that Constantine was proclaimed emperor by his father's troops at an age similar to that of Alexander the Great when he died.³⁰ We know that Alexander died at the age of thirty-three. Eusebius also remarks that Constantine's age at his death (22 May 337) was twice the duration of his reign. The authors who wrote not long after Constantine's death nearly all announce that Constantine died when he was sixty-four or sixty-five years of age.³¹ Later sources most often mention an age between sixty and sixty-five years. This means that Constantine became emperor at thirty-three and ruled for more than thirty years. On the basis of this information he must have been born in 272/73.³² This date corresponds reasonably

²⁸ H. Grégoire, 1938, 581; H. Lietzmann, 1958, 189-190.

²⁹ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 40-42, esp. n.53.

³⁰ *VC* I 8 and IV 53.

³¹ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 39-40.

³² It is remarkable that, although his year of birth has not been transmitted, we do know his *dies natalis*: 27 February (*CIL* I-1, 255, 258, 259); see also A. Demandt, 1989, 62 n.3.

well with the implicit remark about Constantine's age in the panegyric of 310.

Back to Helena. If we assume that Helena died in 328/29 at the age of eighty,³³ her year of birth must be dated to 248/49. Constantine's year of birth then occurs at a convenient moment in Helena's life: she gave birth to him at the age of c.24 years. This corresponds very well with the time at which the relationship between Helena and Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, began: their liaison most probably began in c.270.³⁴ It is not known whether Helena bore any other children besides Constantine.³⁵

There is no clear information in the sources about Helena's social origins. The reticence of contemporary sources about Helena's descent might well be explained by the fact that her insignificant social origins posed a problem for the Emperor Constantine. Since contemporary sources of this period are silent, we must examine later sources.

The first to dare say anything about Helena's descent is the pagan writer Eutropius, active in the mid-fourth century. In his *Breviarium*, written at a time when Constantine's family was no longer in power, he maintains that Constantine was born *ex obscuriore matrimonio*.³⁶ The use of the comparative *obscurius* denotes the insignificance of Helena's descent. In his funeral oration for Theodosius I, Ambrose implies, by referring to her as *stabularia*, that Helena came from the lower social strata of the Roman Empire.³⁷ Literally translated, a *stabularia* is a woman who comes from or works in the stables. Because stables are often associated with inns, the word *stabularia* can also mean female innkeeper or servant at an inn. In antiquity the social prestige of somebody working at an inn was low. The life of a *stabularia* was one spent in servitude, very probably including sexual servitude. In Roman times the word definitely had a negative connotation. For this reason Ambrose adds the adjective *bona* three out of the four times

³³ The age of Helena as given by Eusebius may not be totally reliable. In the first place, numbers and ages given by ancient authors are often exaggerated and unreliable. Secondly, it might well be that Eusebius very consciously ascribed a great age to the Christian Helena in order to compare her with biblical women of great age, like Sarah (Genesis 17:15-18) and Elizabeth (Luke 1).

³⁴ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 36.

³⁵ Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Hist. Eccl.* III 7, refers to Constantia, wife of Licinius, as a daughter of Helena. This must be a mistake. Constantia was a daughter of Constantius Chlorus and his second wife Theodora.

³⁶ *Breviarium* X 2.

³⁷ Ambrosius, *De Ob. Theod.* 42.

he uses the expression with regard to Helena: doubtless Helena was a woman of dubious descent but nonetheless she had a good and unblemished character. Another indication of Helena's humble origins is given by Ambrose when he says that "Christ raised her [Helena] from dung to power".³⁸ In the *Origo Constantini*, probably composed at the beginning of the fifth century, Helena is called *vilissima*.³⁹ This is another indication of Helena's low social origins. Philostorgius (mid-fifth century) says that Helena's descent and social status before her relationship with Constantine's father, could not be considered very honourable. According to him Constantine "had emanated from Helena, a common woman not different from strumpets".⁴⁰ Philostorgius may be referring here to the sexual servitude of *stabulariae*. Nor does Zosimus, writing in the second half of the fifth century, mince his words when he calls Constantine "the son of the illegal intercourse of a low woman with the Emperor Constantius" and "the son of a harlot".⁴¹ In evaluating these comments, we should bear in mind that Zosimus was still a convinced adherent of the pagan cults and a strong opponent of Christianity. His work is characterized by a fierce hostility towards the first Christian emperor.

The sources thus show Helena's humble social origins. She was possibly working at an inn in Bithynia, perhaps even in Drepanum, when she met Constantius Chlorus.⁴² Constantius' presence in this region in c.270 may be deduced from an inscription for a *protector Aureliani Augusti* in Nicomedia, if, as it is thought, this inscription

³⁸ *De Ob. Theod.* 42: ... *illam Christus de stercore levavit ad regnum*

³⁹ *Origo Constantini* II 2.

⁴⁰ *Hist. Eccl.* II 16; according to Bidez, *ibid.* 27, who reconstructed the *Church History* of Philostorgius, this remark is derived from an oration by the Emperor Julian.

⁴¹ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,8,2; 2,9,2 (transl. Ridley).

⁴² It has been suggested that *CTh* 9.7.1 (3 February 326), which concerns women working in inns, provides evidence for Helena's involvement in this profession and hence for her low social origins. Under this law, female owners of inns were liable for punishment in the case of *adulterium*, whereas female servants went free because of their low social status. It has sometimes been supposed that Constantine issued this law to justify the relationship between Constantius and Helena. However, so much emphasis is laid on the unworthy social status of servants who work in taverns, that it is hardly plausible that Constantine proclaimed this law with the intention of justifying the social descent and the former sexual servitude of his mother. In the last century J. Burckhardt, 1898³, 329-330, n.2, in this respect already remarked quite rightly: "Ihr grosser Sohn wird hoffentlich nicht in Bezug hierauf [her humble origins] das Gesetz Cod. Theodos. IX,7,1 erlassen haben, welches eher aus Verachtung als aus Mitleid Weinwirthinnen und deren Dienerinnen von den Gesetzen de adulteriis eximirt."

was meant for Constantius.⁴³ Helena's low social status inevitably had consequences for her relationship with him.

What can be said about the nature of their relationship? Was it a legal marriage or should it rather be considered a form of cohabitation without an official marriage contract? The sources use various expressions to outline Helena's position with regard to Constantius: she was his *coniunx*, *uxor*, *γυνή* or *concubina*. *Coniunx*, which literally means spouse and so indicates a legal marriage, occurs only twice.⁴⁴ *Uxor/γυνή* is mentioned eight times,⁴⁵ whereas *concubina* is found five times.⁴⁶ In his *Chronicle*, Jerome uses the expression *uxor* as well as *concubina*, as do Prosper Tiro and the author of the *Chronica Gallica*. This indicates that *uxor*, which usually means a wedded wife, can in this case not be interpreted as such. In these sources the expression *uxor* has the same meaning as *concubina*: a woman who has a relationship with a man and lives with him under the same roof without being formally wedded

⁴³ *ILS* 2775; see T.D. Barnes, 1982, 36, n.37. In the first half of the seventh century, and possibly earlier, a legend had grown up around the encounter of Helena and Constantius. The most extensive version of this legend was transmitted in the *Church History* of Kallistos Xantophulos (*PG* 145, 1241Dff.), composed in the first half of the fourteenth century. In this story the meeting of Helena and Constantius, Constantine's birth, Helena's humble origins and the connection between Drepanum and Helena are all intertwined. The story goes as follows: Persians, Parthians, Sarmatians and other nations roam about and devastate Roman territory. From Rome Konstas, i.e. Constantius, is sent to appease them. On his way to the East he stayed the night at a tavern in Drepanum in Bithynia. The innkeeper offered Constantius the services of his daughter Helena for the night. In payment Constantius gave Helena a purple cloak. In the course of the same night Constantius had an extraordinary dream in which he saw the sun rising in the west. Because of the peculiarity of the dream he instructed the innkeeper upon his departure the following morning to take great care of his daughter and the child she would bear. Having accomplished his mission Constantius returned to Rome by another route. He was made Caesar and later proclaimed Augustus. Some years afterwards, delegates of Constantius visited Drepanum. Through the purple cloak they recognized Helena and the child Constantine, who had been born meanwhile. Mother and son were taken to Rome to join Constantius. See for this legend, L. Rydén, 1970, 35-38. It is hard to determine when this legend originated. The first written version of it, however, seems early enough to ascertain an encounter of Helena and Constantius in Drepanum.

⁴⁴ Aur. Victor, *Liber de Caes.* 39,25; *CIL* X 517 = *ILS* 708.

⁴⁵ Eutropius, *Brev.* IX 22; *Origo Constantini* I 1; Prosper Tiro, *Ep. Chron.* 942 = Jer., *Chron.* 2306-2308 = *Chron. Min.* I, 445; *Chron. Gall.* a.DXI = *Chron. Min.* I, 643; Philostorgius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 16; Theophanes, *Chronographia* 11, 1-2; 18, 11-13; *CIL* X 1483.

⁴⁶ Prosper Tiro, *Ep. Chron.* 976 = Jer., *Chron.* 2322 = *Chron. Min.* I, 447; *Chron. Gall.* a.DXI = *Chron. Min.* I, 643; *Chron. Cassiodori Senatoris* a.308 = *Chron. Min.* II, 150; Jer., *Chron.* a.306, cf. *Chron. Pasch.* 517; Orosius, *Historiarum adv. Pag. Libri VIII* VII 25, 16.

to him. Concubinage had been permitted and widely put into practice since the days of the Emperor Augustus in cases where both partners were prevented from a *iustum matrimonium* on grounds of their different social status.⁴⁷ It was impossible for Constantius, who belonged to the provincial aristocracy of Dalmatia, to become the lawfully wedded husband of the *stabularia* Helena. What he could do, and this was normal practice, was live with her as if they were married. For this reason some sources name Helena as Constantius' *uxor*, while in reality she was not his legal wife.

According to Barnes, Helena and Constantius were in fact a lawful wedded couple.⁴⁸ For him *uxor* literally means spouse. As proof for this legal marriage Barnes quotes inscription *CIL* X 517 (= *ILS* 708) emphasizing that Helena is called *coniunx* and Eutropius' use of the term *matrimonium*. Concerning the value of *CIL* X 517 as evidence, it should be noted that the inscription dates to somewhere between the years 324 and 326 and that it was specially dedicated to Helena (see below p. 50). It is hard to imagine that Helena, who had in this period risen to prominence at the Constantinian court, would have been designated otherwise. Although the term *concubina* instead of *coniunx* reflects correctly Helena's relationship towards Constantius its use would have been unthinkable. Not only would it have been an affront to Helena's position but it would also have undermined Constantine's own descent. With regard to Eutropius' use of the term *matrimonium*, it must be noted that he qualified it by the comparative *obscurius*. Thus its value as evidence for a supposed official marriage between Helena and Constantius is definitely weakened.

Helena and Constantius lived in concubinage and nobody would have raised any objection to this. In the Roman Empire concubinage was an accepted form of cohabitation. Even Christian moralists like Jerome and Orosius found such relationships acceptable, as they indicate by their use of the word *concubina* (see above note 46).

We do not know where the pair lived. Little is clear about Constantius' career before he became Caesar, but it is possible that they made their home in Dalmatia, Constantius' native region. Naissus has also been suggested because Constantine was born there in 272/73. Helena and Constantius seem to have had

⁴⁷ Men of high rank, like a senator or a *vir perfectissimus*, were not permitted to marry beneath their station; see *CTh* 4.6.3; J. Vogt, 1960², 140; X. Lucien-Brun, 1970, 401-402.

⁴⁸ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 36.

an enduring and stable relationship. They had met c.270 and it was not until 289, when Constantius married Theodora, that he separated from Helena.⁴⁹ Constantius' marriage with Theodora, the daughter of the Augustus Maximian, was a prerequisite for a successful political career in Diocletian's newly introduced tetrarchy.

The fact that Helena and Constantius had not been officially married gave sometimes cause to controversy with regard to the Emperor Constantine's descent. According to the law of succession Constantine had fewer rights than the children produced by the marriage of the lawfully wedded Constantius and Theodora. Mainly for this reason the panegyric of 310 strongly emphasizes that the *paterni lares* consider Constantine, as the eldest son, to be the rightful successor of his father.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Origo Constantini* I 1. T.D. Barnes, 1982, 37.

⁵⁰ *Pan. Lat.* VII (6),4. The problems surrounding hereditary rights to the throne remained. Even after Constantine's death, there was a conflict between his sons and the descendants of Constantius Chlorus and Theodora over the succession; see below pp. 43–44.

CHAPTER TWO

TRIER AND ROME

After Constantius separated from Helena to marry Theodora in 289, Helena's life recedes into obscurity. The young Constantine stayed at court in Nicomedia, where he was educated under the supervision of Diocletian himself.¹ Did Helena go with him to Nicomedia or did she stay elsewhere? The total lack of information makes conjecture pointless. This gap in our knowledge about Helena's life lasts at least until 306, when the troops in York proclaimed Constantine the successor of his father. It is generally assumed that from this time on Helena joined Constantine's court. So Helena may have lived in the two cities where the court stayed regularly: Trier and Rome.

Trier was Constantine's first and, at least initially, most important residence between 306 and 316. It is likely that Helena also resided in Trier for several years. Although contemporary sources give no information on this point, the so-called Helena-tradition, extant in Trier and its surroundings in the Middle Ages, is considered important evidence.

The existence of a Helena-tradition in Trier is first attested to by a possible mention of her name in the so-called Willibrord-calendar of Echternach (now a town in the Duchy of Luxemburg) near Trier. The calendar has been dated to the third decade of the eighth century. The entry for 11 August is as follows: *Depositio sancti Gauriei episcopi et sanctae Haelinae*. This bishop is Gaugerich of Cambrai; Haelina, according to E. Ewig, is Constantine's mother. The date of 11 August does not correspond to Helena's usual feast day—celebrated by the Latin church on 18 August, according to the ninth-century *Martyrologium* of Usuard—but Ewig makes this identification on the grounds that no other Helena is known in this region.²

¹ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 41-42. Constantine accompanied Diocletian and Galerius on several military campaigns. Eusebius saw him for the first time in c.300 when he came through Palestine with Diocletian on his way to Egypt to suppress a rebellion (*VC* I 19).

² E. Ewig, 1956-58, 158-160. Ewig does not consider the alternative date for Helena's feast day as an obstacle for his line of reasoning: firstly, because the date of her saint's day was probably only officially established in the ninth century and second, because other dates were celebrated in the East. The Greeks

Firm evidence for the existence of a Helena-tradition in Trier is the *Vita Helenae*, written in c.850 by Altmann (or Alman) of Hautvillers on the authority of Hincmar, bishop of Reims.³ The impulse for the composition of this *vita* had been the translation some years earlier of the relics of Helena from her tomb at Rome to Reims by the monk Theogis.⁴ Many doubted the authenticity of the relics, even after the pope himself had declared them genuine. Some kind of written 'evidence' was therefore necessary to establish the truth about Helena's remains. Apart from the description of the transfer of the relics,⁵ Altmann gives a lengthy account of Helena's life. Besides his own fantasy, Altmann's source material for the *Vita Helenae* was perhaps information obtained orally from Trier. The *vita* maintains that Helena was born there and that she belonged to a distinguished aristocratic family. She was extremely wealthy and virtually owned the entire city. She also had a palace (*domus*) in Trier. Helena gave this palace to the bishop of Trier as his episcopal church. This fact—Helena's endowment and subsequent remodelling of her palace as Trier's cathedral—secured the Bishop of Trier primacy over the bishops of *Gallia Belgica*.⁶

Altmann thus makes Trier Helena's birthplace and Helena a prominent inhabitant of the city and benefactress of its Christian community. The historical value of this tradition appears dubious. No earlier sources exist to support Altmann's story. Besides, it is believed that Altmann gave his fantasy full rein in composing the *Vita Helenae*.⁷

celebrate Helena's day on 21 May, the Ethiopians on 15 September and the Copts on 24 March and 4 May.

³ Altmann of Hautvillers, *Vitae Helenae*, in *ASS* Aug. III, 580-599. See also H.V. Sauerland, 1889, 61ff.; E. Ewig 1956-58, 153-158.

⁴ *Chronica Sigeberti* a.849 = *PL* 160, 162: *Sancta Helena imperatrix, a filio suo Constantino Magno primo hujus nominis imperatore Rome in ecclesia sanctorum Marcellini et Petri martyrum in mausoleo purpureo sepulta, ad Franciam a Theogiso monacho transfertur, et in diocesi Remensi magna Francorum veneratione excolitur.*

⁵ See e.g. H.V. Sauerland, 1889, 140-143. For the text of the *translatio Helenae*, see *ibid.*, 212.

⁶ *ASS* Aug. III, 583: *Beata igitur Helena, oriunda Trevirensis ... tantae fuit nobilitatis secundum honestatem et dignitatem praesentis vitae, ut pene tota ingentis magnitudinis civitas computaretur in agrum sui praedii. Quod usque hodie demonstrat domus ejus facta ecclesiae pars maxima in honore beati Petri Apostolorum Principis in sedem episcopalem metropolis dicata, adeo ut vocetur et sit prima sedes Galliae Belgicae.*

⁷ H.V. Sauerland, 1889, 72: "Bei einem Schriftsteller aber, welcher ... so manche unwahre Nachricht aus seiner Phantasie geschöpft hat, ist die Möglichkeit nicht ausgeschlossen, dass es auch mit seinen ... Behauptungen über Helena dieselbe bedenkliche Bewandtniss habe."

Later evidence for the Helena-tradition is provided by the double *vita* of Helena and Agricius, which originated in the second half of the eleventh century. One of the sources used by its author was Altmann's legendary description of Helena's life. Agricius, about whose life almost nothing is known, was Bishop of Trier from at least 314 till c.330.⁸ This *vita* relates how Helena, after her discovery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, persuaded Pope Silvester to appoint Agricius, then priest in Antioch, to the see of Trier, in order to win back the population of her native city Trier for the Christian faith. Most of the inhabitants of that city had slipped into pagan practices during the persecution of Christians under Diocletian. Helena gave her residence in Trier to Agricius for use as the city's cathedral. She also presented to him several relics of Christ and the remains of the Apostle Matthias. When Silvester appointed Agricius as Bishop of Trier, he also established his primacy over *Gallia* and *Germania*. This *vita* too must be considered historical fiction: it is based partly on Altmann's *Vita Helenae* and also on the unauthentic Silvester-diploma. This charter, transmitted in various versions, grants the bishopric of Trier primacy in the church provinces of *Gallia* and *Germania*. It already existed in the tenth century and was used by Bishop Theodoric of Trier as an argument in his efforts to obtain primacy over *Gallia* and *Germania* from Pope John XIII. In one of the early versions of the Silvester-diploma Helena is mentioned as the one through whose influence Trier had received first rank. The *vita* of Helena and Agricius should be regarded as another document written to prove Trier's primacy.⁹

According to the medieval tradition, Helena had also been involved in the foundation of the Abbey of St. Maximin at Trier. This foundation legend is definitely unhistorical. Perhaps it developed in imitation of the narrative about the foundation of the cathedral of Trier.¹⁰

⁸ Agricius is mentioned as one of the participants in the synod of Arles in 314 (J.D. Mansi. *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova, et amplissima Collectio* II, 469: *Agroecius episcopus, Felix exorcista de civitate Treverorum*).

⁹ E. Ewig, 1956-58, 147-149; H.H. Anton, 1987, 70-71. See for this *vita* gen. H.V. Sauerland, 1889. For the text *ibid.*, 175-211 and for the Silvester-diploma *ibid.*, 88ff.; *Gesta Treverorum* = *MGH SS VIII*, 152; H.H. Anton, 1987, 75-76. See also *Vita Agricii* in *ASS II*, Jan. 13, 54-63, esp. 61. For Agricius see generally E. Winheller, 1935, 121-145; W. Binsfeld, 1971; Gauthier, 1980, 43-47. His Antiochene origin is disputed. Because the name Agricius was not unfamiliar in Gaul (and Trier) Gauthier, 1980, 44-45, thinks he was a native of Trier; see also H.H. Anton, 1987, 70. According to E. Ewig, 1954, 30-32, Agricius possibly came from Antioch. For other legends about Helena in Trier, see J. Dietz, 1972, 357ff.; H.H. Lauer, 1967, 45-47, 58-61.

¹⁰ E. Ewig, 1956-58, 158; E. Wisplinghoff, 1970, 7; H. Heinen, 1985, Bd. 1,

The most important part of the various *vitae* is that in which Helena puts her *domus* (palace) at the bishop's disposal for transformation into the cathedral of Trier. Although this story is not generally thought to be historical, excavations undertaken since 1943 have demonstrated the existence beneath the cathedral of Trier of remains of buildings dating from the first quarter of the fourth century. It is very likely that these remains were once part of the living quarters of the imperial palace. Does this suggest that there is perhaps some historical truth to the legendary tradition after all? Was Helena's bequeathal of the palace to Agriculus indeed a historical event?

Amidst the excavations the archaeologist Th. K. Kempf found tiny remains of ceiling frescoes.¹¹ On reconstruction, these paintings appeared to be of such high quality and artistry that they presumably were made to adorn the room of a member of the Constantinian family. The coffered ceiling was divided into fifteen unequal panels, separated by garlands. The frescoes, found in fragments and often incomplete, date from the first quarter of the fourth century. A *terminus post quem* is given by a newly minted coin, struck in Trier in c.315, bearing the legend SOLI INVICTO. This coin, embedded in the mortar of a piece of mosaic, was found in the room of the frescoes.¹² A *terminus ante quem* is offered by coins found in the floor of the oldest part of the church building, which was constructed above the frescoed room. These

332; H.H. Anton, 1987, 71. The convent St. Paulinus near Trier also sought alliance with the current Helena-tradition. An inscription from the beginning of the fifth century at St. Paulinus, dedicated to Aelius Constantius *v.c.*, was taken to have been meant for Constantius Chlorus, Helena's 'husband'. This inscription was made into an epitaph by adding the words *Hic iacet: Hic iacet Elius Constantius, vir clarissimus, comes et magister utriusque milicie atque patricius et secundo consul ordinarius*. Thus the tradition arose that Constantius Chlorus was buried at St. Paulinus. Around 1400 the provost of the convent even went so far as to interpret the reliefs on the monument at Igel—clearly showing a well-to-do family of textile manufacturers—as a representation of Constantius' marriage with Helena; see F.-J. Heyen, 1972, 10-12, 307. Churches in Cologne also dated their foundation back to Helena. The *Vita Annonis*, written between 1075 and 1105, mentions the foundation of St. Gereon in Cologne by Helena. In 1236 the churches of St. Gereon, St. Cassius in Bonn and St. Victor in Xanten associated for *consilium et auxilium* because the *gloriosa regina Helena* was considered their foundress. E. Ewig, 1956-58, 184-185, rightly believes that this tradition has no historical basis. A. von Gerkan, 1951, 59, who dates the earliest construction of St. Gereon to the last decades of the fourth century, thinks otherwise: "Es ist gewiss nicht ausgeschlossen, dass es sich hier immer noch um das Bauprogramm der Kaiserin Helena handelte und dass die Legende Recht hat."

¹¹ See for the first excavation report Th. K. Kempf, 1950. The frescoes are restored and are now in the Bischöfliches Museum in Trier; see W. Weber, 1984.

¹² W. Weber, 1984, 29.

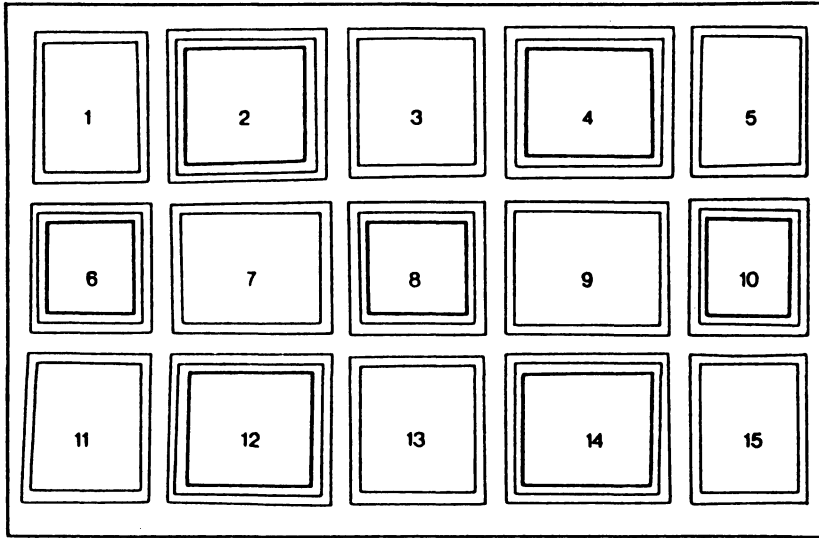
coins were all minted in 325/326.¹³ It is assumed that the room was part of the living quarters of Crispus, Constantine's eldest son. He resided in Trier as representative of his father in 318-323 and possibly also in 324-326.¹⁴ This would explain why in 326 the frescoed room and probably also the adjacent quarters were demolished. In that year Crispus was executed by his father for reasons which remain obscure. The deliberate demolition of his living quarters in Trier may have been a consequence of his *damnatio memoriae*, after which the cathedral of Trier was constructed over the remains of the imperial rooms.

The room decorated with the frescoes is roughly rectangular: 6.80 m. (north wall), 7.00 m. (south wall), 9.95 m. (east wall) and 9.75 m. (west wall). Apart from the ceiling frescoes, it was probably also decorated with a mosaic floor and wall frescoes. All the rediscovered fragments have been laboriously fitted together to reconstruct the panels of the ceiling fresco. The panels show alternately human figures and dancing, winged putti:

1. Two putti with cornucopia.
2. Woman holding a jewel-box from which she takes a string of pearls.
3. Two putti holding a dish.
4. Young woman playing a lyre.
5. Two putti holding a thymaterion.
6. Portrait of a man.
7. Two putti holding a purple cloak.
8. Woman holding a kantharos in her left hand and lifting her veil with her right hand.
9. Two putti: Eros and Psyche.
10. Bearded man.
11. Two putti holding a great vessel.
12. Philosopher holding a scroll in both hands.
13. Two putti carrying purple cloaks.
14. Woman holding a mirror in her right hand and lifting her veil with her left hand.
15. Two putti holding a silver-coloured globe/ball.

¹³ One of the coins is a *folles* of the PROVIDENTIAE AUGG. type, only minted in 324/325 and replaced in 326 by the GLORIA EXERCITUS type. The coin barely shows traces of use. See M.R. Alföldi, 1959-60, 81. See for the building history of the cathedral J. Zink, 1978-79, 17-111.

¹⁴ E.g. M.R. Alföldi, 1959-60, 87-89; W. Weber, 1984, 30. For Crispus, see gen. H.A. Pohlsander, 1984. For the dates, see T.D. Barnes, 1982, 83.



Ceiling frescoes, reconstruction (W. Weber, 1984, 34).

The interpretation of the frescoes is still a matter of debate. The frequent use of the colour purple seems to indicate that the portraits represent imperial figures. This is true especially of the ladies depicted. Unlike the men, all four women are shown with a nimbus and with costly attributes. Some scholars have identified these women as members of the Constantinian family, symbolising the prosperity of the dynasty. Others do not believe that the portraits should be identified with historical figures, but should rather be considered allegorical representations.

When only a few panels had been found and reconstructed, A. Alföldi interpreted the frescoes as an expression of the imperial *laetitia*, *gaudium* and *hilaritas*. He identified the woman holding the jewel-box as Helena representing the *hilaritas populi Romani*, and the putti on either side as expressions of the *gaudium* and *laetitia* which Constantine's reign had brought to the world. M.R. Alföldi agrees with this interpretation and with the identification of the

woman with the jewel-box as Helena. But on the basis of the depiction of attributes like the cornucopia and veils, she thinks that the frescoes refer to a marriage. According to W.N. Schumacher the frescoes not only picture the women of the imperial family but also in an allegorical way refer to a marriage. The marriage in question must have been that of Crispus and Helena the younger, which took place in c.321. The frescoes decorated the bedroom of this Helena. The woman with the kantharos in the centre of the ceiling Schumacher identifies as the younger Helena.¹⁵

Nowadays most scholars—those at any rate who think that the women represent imperial figures—believe that the young woman with the lyre is Crispus' wife. Unfortunately, it was this very fresco which had to undergo large-scale reconstruction. The woman holding the jewel-box is identified as Constantia, Constantine's half-sister and the wife of Licinius; the woman holding the mirror is supposed to be Fausta, Constantine's wife, and the woman with the kantharos is thought to be Helena, mother of Constantine.¹⁶

Other scholars do not accept that these frescoes should be identified with the women of the imperial family. A strong argument is presented by H. Brandenburg. He believes that there can be no question of the depiction of imperial ladies, because the depicted men definitely do not belong to the Constantinian dynasty.¹⁷ The portraits of the ladies should be interpreted as personifications of the prosperity of the age and the happiness of life.¹⁸ Others think that the portraits are allegories of the various seasons, or that they personify *Sapientia*, *Pulchritudo*, *Iuventus* and *Salus*.¹⁹

If one of the portraits indeed depicts Helena—whether or not as a personification of some abstract concept or simply as herself—then we have here perhaps a starting point for the origin of the

¹⁵ A. Alföldi, 1955; M.R. Alföldi 1959-60, 81-82, 85-87; W.N. Schumacher, 1963. On the marriage of Crispus and Helena, see H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 83-85.

¹⁶ W. Weber, 1984, 34.

¹⁷ H. Brandenburg, 1979, 247: "... gerade das Hinzutreten der männlichen Bilder, die keine Kaiserbilder sein können" make clear "dass auch die Frauen eher als Personifikationen zu werten sind und das Deckenbild durch die üblichen Themen der Bildung, des Glücks und des Wohlergehens (Naturpersonifikationen) bestimmt wird."

¹⁸ H. Brandenburg, 1985, presents a survey of the discussions on the interpretation of the ceiling frescoes. He bases his conclusions on comparison of the frescoes with other paintings and mosaics from Late Antiquity.

¹⁹ I. Lavin, 1967a; E. Simon, 1986.

Helena-tradition and especially for the bequeathal of her palace to the bishop and the Christian community of Trier.²⁰ Kempf attempted to connect this chamber below Trier's cathedral with the medieval Helena-tradition. Although he acknowledged that the paintings refer to the wedding of Crispus and the younger Helena, he remained convinced that the frescoes had something to do with the elder Helena. For this reason he identified the room with Helena's *cubile*, mentioned in the text of Altmann,²¹ and suggested in his later publications that the frescoes were not only made on the occasion of Crispus' marriage with the younger Helena but also to celebrate the seventieth birthday of the elder Helena.²² This line of reasoning forces Helena into connection with the ceiling-frescoes only because of the existence of a Helena-tradition in Trier.

It is uncertain whether the origins of the Helena-tradition date back as far as the first quarter of the fourth century. If it does, we can wonder whether this tradition goes back to the elder Helena. It seems reasonable to assume that the frescoes were made for the occasion of the wedding of Crispus and Helena.²³ The attributes on the frescoes refer to married life, as do the putti. The marriage took place c.321. Hardly anything is known about the younger Helena, except that she was married to Crispus, bore him a child in 322 and was probably with child in 324.²⁴ The man with the scroll may also be connected with Crispus (and Helena); he is identified as Lactantius, Crispus' teacher.²⁵ A suitable place

²⁰ E. Ewig, 1954, 33, believes that the donation by Helena contains a strong element of truth because Altmann may have seen the church which had not altered much in the first five or six centuries of its existence: "Alman von Hautvillers hat also den constantinischen Kirchenbau noch gesehen. Damit gewinnt die Nachricht der Palastschenkung durch die Kaiserinmutter Helena einen hohen Grad von Wahrscheinlichkeit. Die Schenkung muss in den letzten Jahren des Agricius erfolgt sein, der wahrscheinlich 329 starb. Agricius hat offenbar den Kirchenbau begonnen; vollendet wurde dieser aber erst unter seinen Nachfolger Maximin."

²¹ *ASS* Aug. III, 583: *nec non cubile regiae ambitionis factum in eadem urbe opere mirabili* See also *Vita Agricii et Helenae* = H.V. Sauerland, 1889, 177.

²² Th. K. Kempf, 1977; Th. K. Kempf, 1978. Also A. Wankenne, 1984, 314-315, thinks the frescoes were made for these two reasons. This guess about the paintings also having been made for Helena's birthday is without grounds. She was probably born in 248 (see above p. 13) so she became 70 in 318, whereas Crispus and the younger Helena were married in 321.

²³ W.N. Schumacher, 1963, 217: "Es ergibt sich durch unsere Identifizierung ... dass es sich ... um Elemente einer symbolisch-allegorischen Darstellung der Hochzeit des Kaisersohnes handelt ..."

²⁴ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 44; H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 83.

²⁵ For the relationship between Crispus and Lactantius, see H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 82-83.

for paintings referring to the happiness of married life is naturally the bedroom, the *cubile*. It therefore seems plausible to consider the frescoed room not as the *cubile* of the elder Helena, as Kempf suggests, but as that of the younger Helena. This bedroom was part of the great complex of imperial quarters in which the Caesar Crispus and his wife Helena lived. In 326, after Crispus' execution and *damnatio memoriae*, the quarters, including the *cubile*, were demolished; then Trier's cathedral was built on the remains. Although very little is known about the younger Helena, it is not impossible that her *cubile* and *domus* were known among the inhabitants of Trier as the *cubile* and *domus* of Helena, as we find in the medieval texts.²⁶ The younger Helena soon disappeared into oblivion, and the *cubile* and *domus* were soon considered to have been those of the much more famous elder Helena. The latter was a renowned and indeed legendary figure because of her alleged discovery of Christ's Cross. Moreover, her name was often mentioned in connection with the foundation of churches. Both Helenas may possibly have become confused, which might explain why in the Middle Ages the origin of the Helena-tradition at Trier is dated back to the elder Helena. It may in fact have been the figure of the younger Helena which lay at its roots. For this reason various medieval *vitae* may attribute Helena's descent to an illustrious family in Trier. Perhaps the younger Helena, about whose origin nothing is mentioned in the sources, came from a rich and distinguished family in Trier? Maybe Crispus, who resided in Trier from 316 onwards, had met her in this northern capital. Her relatively ignoble descent—the local aristocracy of Trier—and hence her obscurity, could clarify why, even while Crispus was still alive, the younger Helena is not mentioned in the ancient historiography of the Constantinian period.²⁷

²⁶ M.R. Alföldi, 1959-60, 87: "... die Deckenmalereien [stammen] ... wohl von den Privatgemächern des Palastes, wo Crispus und auch die junge Helena wohnten, wodurch es begreiflich wird, dass diese Anlage, ob nun deren Grundstück der Kaiserinmutter gehörte oder nicht, später als 'domus Helenae' in der allgemeinen Erinnerung blieb."

²⁷ The origin of the Helena-tradition in Trier becomes even more complicated by drawing in a third Helena: Elen of Carnarvon. This Helena, known from medieval Welsh legends, was a popular figure in Wales. According to the legends she was the wife of the usurper Magnus Maximus (383-388). She bore him a son given the name Constantine. It is known that Maximus and his wife lived in Trier. In his *Dialogi* II 6, Sulpicius Severus describes Maximus' wife as a devout Christian woman and as a great admirer of St. Martin of Tours. Unfortunately, Sulpicius does not mention the name of Maximus' wife and neither do other contemporary sources. So we do not know whether Maximus was actually married to a woman named Helena or whether the Welsh legends

In conclusion the *cubile* may be reasonably identified with the frescoed room beneath the cathedral of Trier. This private room, part of the imperial palace (*domus*), did not belong to Constantine's mother but to Crispus' wife. The room was hers after her marriage to Crispus in 321, and it had been decorated for that occasion with the refund ceiling frescoes. At the time of its decoration, the elder Helena no longer resided in Trier—if in fact she had ever lived there—but had already been for several years in Rome.

It is clear from the above that there is no substantial evidence to establish whether or not Helena ever lived in Trier. For Rome the case is very different.

To the south-east of Rome, just outside the Aurelian walls, there was a territory called *fundus Laurentus* or *fundus Lauretum*. This area extended southwards from the Porta Sessoriana (modern Porta Maggiore) as far as *Mons Gabus*²⁸ and was, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, bound by the Via Praenestina and the Via Latina. The whole area was an estate belonging to Helena: *fundum Lauretum iuxta formam cum balneum et omnem agrum a porta Sessoriana usque ad via Penestrina a via itineris Latinae usque ad montem Gabum, possessio Augustae Helenae, praest. sol. TCXX*.²⁹ The designation *fundus Laurentus* is in all probability the same as *inter duas lauros* which is also mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*.³⁰ This land *inter duas lauros* was possibly already an imperial property in pre-Severan times. The main confirmation for this conjecture is to be found in the burial places and epitaphs of the *equites singulares* which have been discovered *ad duas lauros* on the Via Labicana. These *equites singulares*, whose *castra priora* and *castra nova* were situated in the Lateran area in the south-east corner of Rome, constituted a bodyguard for the emperor and had the privilege of burial on imperial ground. Because most of the sepulchres and epitaphs, of which the earliest date from the beginning of the second century,

are correct. In the British Isles Elen of Carnarvon was soon confused with Helena Augusta. See J.J. Parry, 1938, 272-273; D. Jones, 1968, 113-114; A. Linder, 1975, 78-79; W.J. Mulligan, 1978, 259-260.

²⁸ *Mons Gabus* is not the modern Monte Cavo but a hill which, according to F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 75 + Abb. 1, was probably situated in the neighbourhood of modern Fosse de Centocelle. Deichmann and Tschira have extensively described the ancient and medieval history of this territory.

²⁹ *Lib. Pont.* I, 183. It has been conjectured that this territory first belonged to Constantine's wife Fausta. Only after her death in 326 would it have come into the possession of Helena; see F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 75. Considering Helena's special concern for the estate, this conjecture does not seem very probable.

³⁰ *Lib. Pont.* I, 199, n.91.

have been found *ad duas lauros*, this area must definitely have been an imperial *fundus*, which formed an entity together with the territory of the *castra priora* and *castra nova*.³¹

From the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century Christian catacombs have also been attested *ad duas lauros* on the Via Labicana. This Christian burial ground lay apart from the burial place of the *equites singulares*, although both occupied the same area. Prominent martyrs, like Peter and Marcellinus, who were victims of the persecutions during Diocletian's reign, were buried in these catacombs.³²

After Constantine had defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312 and became master of Rome, he dissolved the *equites singulares*. The area *ad duas lauros* lost its function as burial ground for the *equites*, but the territory remained imperial property. In fact, at some time after 312—a precise date cannot be calculated—the *fundus Laurentus* was acquired by Helena and became a *possessio Helenae*.³³ The *fundus Laurentus* was one of the first areas in Rome where the new Christian conviction of the members of the imperial house was manifested. Already in the second decade of the fourth century a basilica in honour of the above mentioned martyrs, Peter and Marcellinus, was erected on the Via Labicana by order of Constantine. The church of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro is one of the oldest Christian basilicas in Rome. Soon afterwards Constantine gave orders to build a mausoleum right up against the basilica, where Helena herself was later buried: *eisdem temporibus fecit Augustus Constantinus basilicam beatis martyribus Marcellino presbitero et Petro exorcistae in territorio inter duas lauros et mysileum ubi mater ipsius sepulta est Helena Augusta, via Lavicana, miliario III ...*³⁴ Helena showed her interest in the newly built basilica on her estate by bequeathing it a golden *scyphus* engraved with her name on the occasion of its dedication.³⁵ The scope of the estates conferred on the basilica for

³¹ F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 68.

³² *Ibid.*, 70-73.

³³ In the fifth century the *fundus Laurentus* was possibly also known as *Subaugusta*. This may be an extra argument for Helena's actual ownership of the *fundus*; see F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 68; 77-78.

³⁴ *Lib. Pont.* I, 182; see F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 74. That other martyrs besides Peter and Marcellinus were buried on this site is attested by the seventh-century *Notitia Ecclesiarum Urbis Romae*, 16 = CC ser. lat. 175, 307: *Ad Helenam via Campania multi martyres pausant: in aquilone parte ecclesiae Helenae, primus Tiburtius martir; postea intrabis in speluncam: ibi pausant sancti martires Petrus presbyter et Marcellinus martir; postea in interiore antro Gorgonius martir et multi alii: et in uno loco in interiore spelunca xl martires, et in altero xxx martires, et in tertio iii Coronatos; et sancta Helena in sua rotunda.*

³⁵ *Lib. Pont.* I, 183: *scyphum aureum purissimum ubi nomen Augustae designatur.* The

its maintenance shows the special interest in it of the imperial house. The income of the estates was only surpassed by that of those belonging to the Lateran baptistry and basilica.³⁶ The *fundus Laurentus*, however, remained Helena's property. After her death it probably came into the possession of the basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro.

The fact that Helena possessed a considerable estate just outside the Aurelian walls does not necessarily mean that she actually lived in Rome after 312. She almost certainly had estates in other parts of the empire as well.³⁷ Fortunately, however, there is evidence that points to Rome as her residence. In the so-called *Gesta Xysti* the modern basilica S. Croce in Gerusalemme is referred to as *basilica Heleniana quae dicitur Sessorium*.³⁸ This complex is the *Palatium Sessorianum*, which lay within the walls in the south-eastern part of Rome. The *Palatium Sessorianum* was originally a suburban villa—built before the construction of the Aurelian walls—like many others found in the Agro Romano. To this suburban villa was attached an amphitheatre (*Amphitheatrum Castrense*), a circus (*Circus Varianus*) and public baths (*Thermae Helenae*). The villa was called *Palatium Sessorianum* at least from the beginning of the fourth century. Stamps on the tiles of the church of S. Croce bearing the names of the Emperors Commodus and Septimius Severus date the construction of the villa to 180-211. The kind of masonry used in the villa corresponds to the brickwork in use during the first quarter of the third century.³⁹ Tile-stamps, brickwork and also an inscription on a waterpipe of the S. Croce, mentioning the names of the Emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla⁴⁰ suggest that the villa had been imperial property from the end of the second century onwards.

The palace-complex was situated next to the *fundus Laurentus* and obviously both areas originally formed an entity. The construction of the Aurelian walls in 271-275, which cut straight through the domain, did not destroy the unity of the area,

dedication must have taken place before 324 because all estates granted to the church of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro at its dedication were located in the western half of the empire (even only in Italy). Not until after the defeat of Licinius in 324 could Constantine dispose of estates in the eastern empire; see F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 75.

³⁶ F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 75.

³⁷ VC III 46 states that Helena's last will leaves her possessions to her son and grandsons.

³⁸ *Lib. Pont.* I, 196, n.75.

³⁹ For the archaeological evidence, see R. Krautheimer, 1937-1970, I, 177.

⁴⁰ *CIL* XV² 7364.

although the palace itself was now located within the walls and its grounds outside the walls. If the *fundus Laurentus* was a *possessio Helenae*, which hardly seems in doubt, then the *Palatium Sessorianum*, including the amphitheatre, the circus and the public baths, must also have belonged to her. Three inscriptions discovered close to the basilica of S. Croce in Gerusalemme confirm the connection between Helena and the *Palatium Sessorianum*.⁴¹ One (*CIL* VI 1136) is of particular interest in this matter. It mentions the repair of the public baths near the palace by Helena after they had been destroyed by fire; from then on the baths were known as *Thermae Helenae*.

The *fundus Laurentus*, including the *Palatium Sessorianum*, was probably Helena's possession from 312. She may have owned the estate until her death. The fact that three out of the eight transmitted inscriptions dedicated to Helena have been found at or very near the site of the former palace confirms the special connection between this south-eastern corner of Rome and the empress-mother. The repairs carried out on the destroyed baths in particular show Helena's concern for the area and its buildings. The golden *scyphus* which Helena donated to the basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro is an expression of her religious devotion to this newly built church on her land. F.W. Deichmann and A. Tschira think it feasible that Constantine built the basilica at the insistence of his mother. They even allow for the possibility that the church was constructed on the initiative of Helena alone.⁴² A clear connection between Helena and the *Palatium Sessorianum* is also confirmed by the *Gesta Xysti*. Archaeological research has shown the transformation of one of the rooms of the palace into a

⁴¹ *CIL* VI 1134 = *ILS* 709; *CIL* VI 1135; *CIL* VI 1136 and possibly *CIL* VI 36950. See for the inscriptions below pp. 45–54.

⁴² F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 76–77, compare the construction of the basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro with that of the church of S. Agnese on the Via Nomentana. This basilica was built by Constantine's daughter (Constantina) or by Constantine *ex rogatu filiae suae* (*Lib. Pont.* I, 180). Helena's involvement with the construction of the church of St. Peter, begun at the end of the second decade of the fourth century, has also been suggested. According to the *Liber Pontificalis* a massive gold cross once covered St. Peter's grave in the basilica. The cross had an inscription of black enamelled letters with the name of Helena: CONSTANTINUS AUGUSTUS ET HELENA AUGUSTA HANC DOMUM REGALEM SIMILE FULGORE CORUSCANS AULA CIRCUMDAT (*Lib. Pont.* I, 176). Unfortunately it was lost during one of the sacks of Rome in the fifth century. R. Egger, 1959, 185 and 199, believes the cross was placed on the apostle's grave by Constantine and Helena in 326 during Constantine's *Vicennalia*, when the transept and the monument built over St. Peter's grave were already finished and probably dedicated.

chapel or church, later known as the S. Croce in Gerusalemme. According to the *Gesta Xysti* the church was called *basilica Heleniana* before it was given this name. This remodelling of the palace can be dated to the third decade of the fourth century, i.e. to the last years of Helena.⁴³ This date corresponds with the following passage in the *Liber Pontificalis*: *Eodem tempore fecit Constantinus Augustus basilicam in palatio Sessoriano ... quae cognominatur usque in hodiernum diem Hierusalem.*⁴⁴ Although it is expressly stated that Constantine was responsible for the foundation of the basilica, it seems plausible that Helena took the initiative in the remodelling of her palace.

There is no undisputable evidence that Helena actually lived in the *Palatium Sessorianum* in Rome. But the statements in the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Gesta Xysti*, the inscriptions and the archaeological details taken together indicate a clear connection between Helena, the *fundus Laurentus* and the *Palatium Sessorianum*. Helena's burial in the mausoleum on the Via Labicana next to basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro suggests too her attachment to the estate. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Helena not only owned it, but also that she resided there after 312.

⁴³ R. Krautheimer, 1967, 130, n.49. Although Krautheimer assumes that she died in 329-330 instead of in 328-329, it seems plausible that Helena witnessed the remodelling of her palace. In view of this, Krautheimer retracts an earlier statement (1937-1970, I, 184ff.) according to which the transformation from palace to church took place in two phases c.350 and c.400. It is not known when exactly the church became known as S. Croce in Gerusalemme. It was probably not called *basilica Sanctae Crucis* (*Lib. Pont.* II, 385) until the twelfth century. From the time of its dedication it was generally called *ecclesia Hierusalem*, *basilica Hierusalem* or sometimes *basilica Heleniana*. According to the *Lib. Pont.* I, 179, the church possessed a relic of the Holy Cross from its dedication onwards. This is impossible, but it is feasible that already in the fourth century, after the Cross as a Christian cult object had become popular and the discovery of the Cross had been ascribed to Helena, a splinter of the holy wood was preserved there.

⁴⁴ *Lib. Pont.* I, 179.

CHAPTER THREE

HELENA'S CONVERSION

Obviously Helena was a Christian when, at the end of her life, she departed from Rome and began her travels through Palestine and the other eastern provinces. What can be said about her conversion?

It has been suggested that from her childhood on Helena had felt great sympathy for the Christian faith.¹ This is questionable. It is hard to determine when her interest in Christianity quickened and when she was converted. Did this take place during her relationship with Constantius Chlorus, of whom it is said that he was well-disposed towards the Christians during the Great Persecution?² Did it when she heard about the Antiochene priest and martyr Lucian?³ Or shortly after 312, when Constantine granted Christians freedom of religion, protected and favoured the Christian church in all possible ways and became a Christian himself? Each option is possible, but it is safest to date Helena's conversion after 312. Eusebius relates that Helena was converted by her son Constantine. He says that Constantine made Helena such a devoted servant of God, which she had not been before, that it seemed as if she had from childhood on been taught by the Redeemer himself.⁴ Of course Eusebius here not only praises Helena's piety and profound Christian conviction but also in particular the piety and missionary zeal of his hero Constantine. But it is apparent from his remarks that Helena was definitely not a Christian before Constantine's successful attempt to convert her.⁵

¹ R. Couzard, 1911, 10-12.

² *VC* I 13; 16; 17. The name of Constantius' and Theodora's daughter Anastasia, a typical Christian name, suggests Constantius' Christian sympathy; cf. R. Lane Fox, 1986, 610-611.

³ See above p. 10-11.

⁴ *VC* III 47.

⁵ Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* I 18,1 and in his wake Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Hist. Eccl.* III 6,1 state wrongly that Constantine was raised a Christian by Helena and Constantius Chlorus. K. Aland, 1960, 223, thinks that Eusebius would have gladly dated Helena's conversion earlier, but could not do so because of the simple fact that Helena was not a Christian before 312. Helena's conversion is for Aland particularly decisive evidence for Constantine's Christianity: "Die Christin Helena scheint mir ein schlagender Beweis für den Christen Konstantin." According to J. Vogt, 1963, 46, Helena's conversion should be seen as proof of Constantine's missionary zeal: "It was his declared desire to win people for his

It is not known which pagan cults had Helena's attention before she became a Christian. For this reason J. Vogt in 1963 rightly remarks: "We do not know which faith she followed prior to Constantine's elevation and her own ascent."⁶ Thirteen years later, however, Vogt has changed his opinion. In an article entitled 'Helena Augusta, das Kreuz und die Juden', he thinks Helena may originally have been Jewish. The four arguments Vogt produces to support his opinion are of a dubious nature: 1) Helena was of Oriental descent. 2) Her appearance showed Jewish characteristics; Vogt even speaks of "die energisch gebogene Nase". 3) Her name could be inferred from the first-century princess Helena of Adiabene who, together with her son, had been converted to Judaism.⁷ 4) To erase her old sin, i.e. her adherence to the Jewish religion, and to show her disgust for the guilt of the Jews in crucifying the Messiah, she, together with other former Jews, had devoted all her efforts, to finding the Cross on which Christ died.⁸

Vogt's arguments cannot stand the test of scrutiny. His first three arguments are so vague and dubious that we can reject them without further discussion. The last argument demands more careful consideration. Vogt derives it from the legend of the discovery of the Cross and the *Actus Silvestri*. According to the legend, the Cross was discovered by Helena when she visited Jerusalem. Some versions allege that the Cross had been hidden by the Jews because the holy wood was proof of their share in the execution of Christ. It is true that in Late Antiquity the Cross played an important role in conflicts between Jews and Christians, but during Helena's lifetime this was not yet the case. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that Helena was responsible for the discovery of Christ's Cross.⁹ In fact, the earliest extant source which mentions Helena's discovery of the Cross is Ambrose's *De Obitu Theodosii*, composed in 395.¹⁰

More important than the legend of the Cross for Vogt's argument is the *Actus Silvestri*.¹¹ More than 300 manuscripts of this

faith; and at his court Helena's conversion must have been the finest reward of his missionary zeal."

⁶ J. Vogt, 1963, 45.

⁷ Fl. Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 20,49ff.; 71; 95; *Bell. Jud.* 5,55; 119; 147.

⁸ J. Vogt, 1976, 219ff.

⁹ For the discovery of the Cross, the silence about it in contemporary sources, and the origin and development of the legend, see below Part two: legend.

¹⁰ *De Ob. Theod.* 40-49.

¹¹ For the Latin text see B. Mombritius, 1910, vol.2, 508-531.

Actus are known in Latin, Greek, Syriac and Armenian.¹² The origin of the *Actus Silvestri* is to be dated to the second half of the fifth century. In the first half of the sixth century it was inserted into the *Liber Pontificalis*.¹³ The main theme of the *Actus* is Constantine's and Helena's conversion. Although the various versions of the treatise differ over details, the main outline of the story is the same in all versions. Constantine persecutes the Christians of Rome. Silvester, Bishop of Rome, leaves the city to escape these persecutions. At the same time Constantine is afflicted with leprosy. To cure his illness pagan priests advise Constantine to bath in the blood of newborn babies. Out of pity for the crying children and their lamenting mothers, Constantine cannot bring himself to kill the babies. In a nocturnal vision the Apostles Peter and Paul appear to Constantine and advise him to see Silvester. Their meeting leads to Constantine's conversion and the cure of his leprosy through the baptismal water. Immediately the Emperor proclaims pro-Christian measures. Everywhere churches are built and all inhabitants of the empire are advised to become converts. Helena, together with her grandsons Constans and Constantius *in partibus Orientis*,¹⁴ writes a letter to her son to congratulate him with his denouncement of the pagan cults. At the same time she expresses her disappointment at Constantine's conversion to Christianity. A conversion to Judaism, of which she herself was an adherent, would have been better. An exchange of letters follows and Constantine finally proposes to organise in Rome a debate between Christian priests, including Silvester, and twelve Jewish scribes in order to establish which faith is the best. Two pagans are chosen as arbitrators of the discussion. It takes place and is convincingly won by Silvester and the Christian priests. The audience is so impressed and convinced by the power of Christianity that it is totally converted, Jewish scribes, pagan arbitrators and Helena herself.

It is highly improbable that this legend is based on a historical event. Religious debates between Jews and Christians were popular literary subjects, especially since the rightness of the Christian cause and consequently the wrongness of the Jewish could thus be demonstrated.¹⁵ According to W. Levison the legend possibly

¹² W. Levison, 1924, 174.

¹³ W. Levison, 1924, 181-186, thinks Rome was the place of origin of the legend. According to L. Duchesne, *Lib. Pont.* I, CIX-CXX (especially CXIX) the legend probably originated in Mesopotamia, near Edessa and Nisibis.

¹⁴ *Bithynia* according to some versions.

¹⁵ W. Levison, 1924, 187-189.

belongs to "den gerade in der Heiligenliteratur Roms stark vertretenen 'geschichtlichen Romanen', bei denen ein winziger Bruchteil geschichtlicher Tatsachen in einer Fülle freier Erfindung aufgegangen ist."¹⁶ In other words, there is a development towards the inclusion of rather more fiction than historical fact.

Vogt's argument for establishing Helena's Jewish descent is therefore based on dubious historical evidence. On this subject, the evidential value of the legend of the Cross and the *Actus Silvestri*, interesting as they may be in other respects, is nil. From the more trustworthy source material it can be concluded that Helena was never an adherent of the Jewish faith.¹⁷

On the authority of Eusebius, it is plausible that Helena was brought to Christianity by her son. Like other members of the Constantinian family, her conversion was the result of Constantine's sympathy for the Christian religion. This means that we should date her conversion not long after 312 because this year marked the beginning of Constantine's sympathetic feelings towards the Christians and their religion. The construction of the basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro on her own *fundus Laurentus* during the second decade of the fourth century, her gift of a golden *scyphus* to this basilica and her possible involvement in the building of the basilica of St. Peter on the Vatican hill, show her interest in Christianity. In any event, there are clear indications of Helena's Christian conviction in c.325, when she transformed one of the rooms of her palace into a chapel.¹⁸

Despite the fact that, on the initiative of Constantine, Arianism had been decreed false and unorthodox at the Council of Nicaea (325), Helena's sympathy for the martyr Lucian, Arius' teacher,¹⁹ and her conflict with the anti-Arian bishop Eusthatus of Antioch during her visit to that city, indicate Arian leanings on her part.²⁰

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁷ *RAC* s.v. Helena II, 357: "Dass H. vorher nicht der heidnischen, sondern der jud. Religion angehangen habe, wie Vogt H. nachweisen möchte, bleibt reine Vermutung ...".

¹⁸ See above pp. 33-34.

¹⁹ See above pp. 10-11.

²⁰ Athanasius, *Hist. Ar.* 4, 1-2; see also H. Chadwick, 1948, 29ff., E.D. Hunt, 1982, 35-36, and below pp. 71-72.

CHAPTER FOUR

HELENA'S POSITION AT THE COURT OF CONSTANTINE

Though not a regular phenomenon, it was not unusual for women—the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of emperors—to occupy a prominent position at the imperial court and to be officially regarded as vital components of an imperial dynasty. Imperial women were particularly influential during the reign of the Severan and Theodosian emperors, but also under Trajan's rule, and they were sometimes even given the official title of Augusta to denote their official position at the side of the emperor.¹ This does not mean that women actually ruled; it is not difficult to imagine, however, that after the granting of an official title their authority in court circles increased substantially. How then, are we to evaluate the empress-mother Helena's role at the court of Constantine and within the empire? Unfortunately, written sources are of no great value in answering this question. But, there is numismatic and epigraphical material which provides some indications.² On this basis Helena's status within the Constantinian dynasty can be determined fairly precisely. Crucial here is the autumn of 324 when Constantine honoured Helena by granting her the official title of Augusta, which earlier emperors also occasionally had given to their female kin.³ From the end of 324 until Helena's death, the number of coins bearing her portrait increases very rapidly, as do inscriptions dedicated to the new Augusta. Unfortunately the sources tell us little about her position and status before 324.

It is generally believed that Helena was a *Nobilissima Femina* until 324. This title occurs on small bronze coins. This so-called

¹ See e.g. H. Temporini, 1978; E. Kettenhofen, 1979; K.G. Holum, 1982. For a list of all imperial women who were given the title Augusta, see D. Kienast, 1990, 53-57.

² Though coins for imperial women were not uncommon, the mere fact that Eusebius (*VC* III 47) remarks that coins with the portrait of Helena were minted, indicates the special nature of the issue. Constantine also minted coins for his wife Fausta and his sister Constantia. After his reign the first women in whose honour coins were once again minted were the Theodosian empresses (end of the fourth century).

³ According to Eusebius, *VC* III 47, Helena was proclaimed Augusta in all provinces and by army-units. The last empress before Helena who received this title was Galeria Valeria, wife of Galerius (305-311); see T.D. Barnes, 1982, 9.

HELENA NF-coin bears on its obverse the draped bust of Helena, looking right, and the legend HELE-NA. NF. The reverse depicts an eight-pointed star enclosed within a wreath. The letters NF stand for *Nobilissima Femina*. This coin raises some problems. In the first place, the quantity of these coins, minted at an unknown date,⁴ is very small. Secondly, they were minted at only one mint, that of Thessalonica.⁵ Thirdly, the image of Helena differs greatly from that used on later Helena-coins, the so-called HELENA AUGUSTA-coins.⁶

The small issue of these coins in itself is not particularly strange. The coins for Constantine's wife Fausta presenting her as *Nobilissima Femina* were also minted in a small quantity.⁷ Helena's image and the fact that the coin was produced only at Thessalonica present more serious problems. J. Maurice considers it rather peculiar that coins honouring *Helena Nobilissima Femina* should have been minted only in Thessalonica. He therefore believes that the HELENA NF-coins were issued in honour of another Helena, the wife of Constantine's son Crispus. The fleet for the second war (324) between Constantine and Licinius of which Crispus was the supreme commander, had been assembled at Thessalonica. According to Maurice, it is plausible to assume that Crispus and his wife Helena stayed in Thessalonica during the preparations for the war. Coins for Helena could have been minted on this occasion.⁸ The effigy on the HELENA NF-coin shows a much younger face and different facial characteristics than those of the Helena-coins minted from 324 onwards. In Maurice's opinion this also indicates that the HELENA NF-coin was minted in honour of Crispus' wife.

Maurice's theory is not completely watertight. For propaganda purposes imperial figures on coins were mostly depicted younger than they actually were. This is true also in the case of Helena.

⁴ The period 318-319 has been suggested by *RIC* VII, 503-505 and E. Conrad, 1978, 191. J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol. 1, 91, suggested 313-324.

⁵ J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol.1, 90.

⁶ For pictures of the HELENA NF and the HELENA AUGUSTA-coins see e.g. R. Delbrück, 1933, Taf. 10-11.

⁷ M.R. Alföldi, 1963, 144-145.

⁸ J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol.1, 501 (*addenda et corrigenda*); vol. 2, 451-456. In vol. 1, 91, Maurice still ascribed the HELENA NF-coin to Constantine's mother. M.R. Alföldi, 1959-1960, 82-83, initially agreed with Maurice but used different evidence. According to her, the hair-style of the HELENA NF-coins is too different from that on the HELENA AUGUSTA-coins. Alföldi explains the small number of coins by arguing that the HELENA NF-coin was a special issue for the occasion of Crispus' marriage to Helena. In a later publication, 1963, 144, she corrected her opinion and ascribed the coin to Constantine's mother.

Coins with her portrait issued after 324 depict a woman much younger than her age of seventy-five years. The fact that images on coins do not reflect the actual features of the depicted persons also explains the difference between the facial characteristics on the HELENA NF-coin and the later Helena-coins. Most numismatists thus agree that the HELENA NF-coins were minted not for Crispus' wife, but in honour of Constantine's mother.⁹

Immediately after Constantine had defeated Licinius at Chrysopolis in the autumn of 324, coins were issued in honour of HELENA AUGUSTA. The first examples of this type were most probably minted in Antioch at the beginning of October.¹⁰ It is plausible to assume that Constantine had already decided to endow his wife Fausta and his mother Helena with the title of Augusta before the decisive battle against Licinius. A draft for the HELENA AUGUSTA-coin had probably been made and was ready to be distributed among the various imperial mints after the outcome of the battle.¹¹ That all this was planned in advance is indicated by the fact that, immediately after the battle of Chrysopolis, Constantine consciously presented himself on his coins not only as a *Victor* but also as a divinely inspired emperor, ruling the empire explicitly with the support of his next of kin.¹² From October 324 onward, Constantine involved members of his family in the government of the empire. This new situation is reflected by various coins.¹³ It is significant that the very moment Constantine had become sole ruler he honoured Fausta and Helena with the title Augusta and in a symbolical way shared his power with them. Coins in honour of Helena and Fausta were distributed in far greater numbers than in the period before 324,

⁹ E.g. H. Cohen, 1880-1892, VII-2, 97, no.14; R. Delbrück, 1933, 84; *RIC* VII, 45. Evidence for this may be provided by HELENA AUGUSTA-coins minted in Alexandria, which bear the same portrait as the HELENA NF-coin; see for these Alexandrian coins, J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol. 2, 451-456.

¹⁰ J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol. 2, 451-456; vol. 3, 204. The proclamation of Helena as Augusta and consequently the appearance of HELENA AUGUSTA-coins has no connection with the elevation of Constantius II to the rank of Caesar on 8 November 324, as is surmised by some scholars. Cf. T.D. Barnes, 1982, 9; *RIC* VII, 26, 77. The first coins of the HELENA AUGUSTA type had already been issued by the mint of Antioch at the beginning of October.

¹¹ P.M. Bruun, 1961, 61-62. The name of Helena is not spelled uniformly on all coins. She is mostly designated FLAVIA HELENA AUGUSTA, but also FLAVIA IULIA HELENA AUGUSTA or even sometimes only AELENA. Abbreviations also occur; see H. Cohen, 1880-1892, VII-2, 95-97.

¹² P.M. Bruun, 1961, 53. T. Grunewald, 1990, 134ff.

¹³ The various issues of coins clearly present the Constantinian family as a ruling dynasty; see *RIC* VII, e.g. 35, 54f.

and it was obvious to those into whose hands they came that Helena and Fausta were being presented as protectors and pillars of the new Constantinian society. This is especially clear in the legend *SECVRITAS REIPVBLICE* (*sic*) on most *HELENA AUGUSTA*-coins.¹⁴ The coins for *FAUSTA AUGUSTA* usually bear the legend *SALVS ET SPES REIPVBLICAE*.

As mentioned above, the production of *HELENA AUGUSTA*-coins started in Antioch but soon spread all over the empire. The coins were minted in Alexandria, Antioch, Cyzicus, Nicomedia, Heraclea (Thrace), Constantinople, Thessalonica, Sirmium, Siscia, Tarragona, Arles, Lyons, London, Rome and Trier. Until shortly after Helena's death there was a constant supply.¹⁵ Regardless of their provenance the coins show great similarity. The essential features of the design remained the same although there were small differences both in the quality of craftsmanship, and in the artistic presentation of Helena. The most widely minted *HELENA AUGUSTA*-coin is the *SECVRITAS REIPVBLICE* type. It is a small bronze coin, about 19 mms. in diameter. The obverse invariably features Helena's diademed and draped bust, facing right, with the legend *FL HELENA AUGUSTA: Flavia Helena, Empress*. Over the years the diadem gradually developed from a pearl-diadem to a band-diadem adorned with pearls or jewels. Her hair is worn in a knot and is sleekly combed without any waves. The reverse shows Helena as *Securitas*, standing on the left, holding a branch, raising her robe (*pallium*) with her right hand and surrounded by the legend *SEC REIPL: the Security of the Republic*. Clearly this *Securitas* should be identified with Helena.¹⁶

The diadem that Helena wears in her hair deserves special mention. She is the only woman of the Constantinian dynasty who is invariably depicted on coins with this ornament. In spite of their identical title a distinction of rank between the two imperial women has been supposed because Fausta is less often depicted with the same or similar ornament. Helena is thought to have been higher in rank than her daughter-in-law.¹⁷ M.R. Alföldi

¹⁴ The spelling of *REIPUBLICAE* with E instead of AE stemmed either, according to J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol.2, 63-64, from a mistake in the chancellery, where design and text for the coin were made, or from the local spelling in Antioch where the first *HELENA AUGUSTA*-coins were minted. This incorrect spelling was subsequently adopted by all mints.

¹⁵ The issue of *HELENA AUGUSTA*-coins has been attested until the spring of 329; see J. Maurice, 1901, 183 and *RIC* VII, 72-73.

¹⁶ *RIC* VII, 53: "It is typical of the time that ... the figures on the reverses ... should ... be identified with the imperial personages of the obverses."

¹⁷ J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol.2, 45; *RIC* VII, 456.

has disputed this opinion.¹⁸ She thinks the diadem was simply part of Helena's hairstyle. No conclusions regarding distinctions of rank can be derived from the fact that one Augusta wears a diadem and the other does not. Moreover, there are coin portraits of Fausta on which she does indeed wear a diadem.¹⁹ In this case her hairstyle is identical with Helena's: sleekly combed and tied back in a knot. It is therefore highly improbable that any conclusions about rank and status can be attached to the wearing of a diadem. The diadem belonged to a specific coiffure and seems to have had a practical use in keeping the hair in place.²⁰

The flood of coins after 324 indicates a significant change in Helena's status. Constantine made her an Augusta, and by endowing her with this title, she gained a prominent and authoritative position at his court and in the empire in general. She became one of the pillars upon which the security of the *res publica* rested. We do not know how far Helena's influence extended, but Augusta was certainly not only an honorary title.²¹ Her increased authority is mentioned by Eusebius. He refers not only to her portrait on coins and her title of Augusta, but also states that Constantine had put the imperial treasury completely at her disposal.²² Some sources even allege that Helena was Constantine's co-ruler.²³

The extent of Helena's influence within the Constantinian dynasty was amply demonstrated some years after her death. After Constantine's death on 22 May 337, a deadlock soon arose with regard to his succession. His own sons, Constans, Constantius and Constantine, but also the descendants of Constantius Chlorus and Theodora, all voiced a superior claim. Constantine had involved some of these descendants in the government of the empire: Dalmatius for instance, son of Constantine's half-brother Fl.

¹⁸ M.R. Alföldi, 1963, 144-145.

¹⁹ H. Cohen, 1880-1892, VII-2, 334, (no. 4), 335 (no. 11), 336 (no. 16, 18), 337 (no. 23, 24); R. Delbrück, 1933, 87 (no. 7, 8); *RIC* VII, 330, 519.

²⁰ If H. Kähler, 1962, is right in arguing that the mosaic in Aquileia, dated to 325, shows the Constantinian family, with Constantine and Fausta as the most prominent figures (Constantine is surrounded by his female kin, Helena amongst them, and Fausta next to Crispus, Constantine II, Constantius, Constans), then we might perhaps even suppose Fausta's position to have been more important than that of Helena.

²¹ An indication of her influence can perhaps be inferred from the career of Flavius Optatus, consul in 334. Due perhaps to the influence of Helena, who was a family connection of his—his wife seems to have been a relative of Helena (Libanius, *Or.* 42, 26/7)—his star rapidly rose; see T.D. Barnes, 1982, 107.

²² *VC* III 47.

²³ Paulinus of Nola, *Epist.* 31,4; Sulpicius Severus, *Chron.* II 33.

Dalmatius, had been made Caesar (335-337).²⁴ Both branches of the family claimed the throne. A solution for this impasse was not immediately found, until on 9 September Constantine's sons declared themselves Augustus with the help of the army. With this stroke, the fate of the other branch of the family was sealed. It was almost completely eradicated. During the short interregnum from 22 May until 9 September 337, two types of coins bearing the portraits of Helena and Theodora were minted in Trier, Lyons, Rome and Constantinople. They reflect the problems surrounding the succession.²⁵ Theodora, the mother of Constantine's half-brothers and half-sisters, is depicted on one coin type. The obverse shows a bust of Theodora wearing a diadem in her hair, facing right, with the legend FL MAX THEODORA AVG. The reverse shows a personified *pietas* with the legend PIETAS ROMANA. Helena is depicted on the other coin. The obverse shows a bust of Helena with a diadem in her hair, facing right, with the legend FL IVL HELENAE AVG. The reverse shows a personification of *pax* carrying an olive branch and a sceptre and the legend PAX PUBLICA.

These coins present Helena and Theodora as the ancestresses of the respective branches of the Constantinian family. The fact that the former *stabularia* Helena was considered the ancestress of an imperial dynasty proves her authority and prominence within the family of Constantine. Even after her death her position as *progenetrix* of the dynasty was recognized and considered important.²⁶

²⁴ Fl. Dalmatius was consul in 333. Constantine's other half-brother Julius Constantius, the Emperor Julian's father, was consul in 335. See T.D. Barnes, 1982, 105, 108.

²⁵ J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol.1, 261, 495, 498; vol.2, 136-137, 535; *RIC* VIII, 79. J.P. Callu, 1974, 149, thinks that the coins were first minted in 335 on the occasion of the reconciliation of the two branches of the Constantinian family.

²⁶ Except for the HELENA NF, SECVRITAS REIPUBLICAE and PAX PUBLICA coins, other coin types, though in far smaller number, have been attested.

1. Obverse: Bust of Helena, facing right, wearing a ribbon in her hair. In comparison with other coin portraits this one shows an old lady. Legend: FLAVIA HELENA AVGVSTA.

Reverse: The empress as *pietas* carrying a child on her left arm and holding an apple in her right hand which she passes to a second, standing child. Legend: PIETAS AVGVST FEL. (see J. Maurice, 1908-1912, vol.2, 501; M.M. Alves Dias, 1978).

2. Obverse: Bust of Helena, facing right and wearing a diadem. Legend: FLAVIA HELENA AVGVSTA.

Reverse: Standing *felicitas* carrying an olive branch and a sceptre. Legend: FELICITAS AVGVSTA (H. Cohen, 1880-1892, VII-2, 95, no.1).

3. Obverse: Bust of Helena, facing right and wearing a diadem. Legend: FL

Helena's importance as *genetrix* can also be observed in the inscriptions dedicated to her. At least eight Latin inscriptions known to be genuine are dedicated to Helena.²⁷ In six inscriptions she is addressed as Augusta, which means they were set up after 324, the year in which she was honoured with this title. In the other two inscriptions only her name is mentioned, with in one case the addition DN (*Domina Nostra*).

Of the eight inscriptions, three were found in the southeast corner of the city of Rome, the area where Helena resided after 312. *CIL* VI 1134 and *CIL* VI 1136 were discovered near the modern church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme, the former *Palatium Sessorianum*. *CIL* VI 1135 was found near the basilica of S. Giovanni in Laterano, not very far from S. Croce.

CIL VI 1134 = *ILS* 709:

DOMINAE NOSTRAE FL. IU[L]
HELENAE PIISSIMAE AUG.
GENETRICI D N CONSTAN
TINI MAXIMI VICTORIS
CLEMENTISSIMI SEMPER
AUGUSTI AVIAE CONSTAN

IVL HELENAE AVG.

Reverse: *Pietas* carrying a child on each arm. Legend: PIETAS ROMANA (H. Cohen, 1880-1892, VII-2, 96, no.8).

4. Obverse: Bust of Helena, facing right, wearing a pearl-diadem in her hair. Legend: FL HELENA AVGVSTA.

Reverse: The gate of a camp with towers on both sides and above the gate a star. Legend: PROVIDENTIAE AVGG (H. Cohen, 1880-1892, VII-2, 96, no. 2).
5. In *RIC* VII, 539, a GLORIA EXERCITUS coin with Helena's portrait is mentioned, minted in Heraclea from 330 onwards, that is after Helena's death. It may well be that there is some mistake here, since no Helena-coins of this type are mentioned in the complete list of GLORIA EXERCITUS coins (*RIC* VII, 557-561).

²⁷ According to the comment in the Corpus, *CIL* VI³ 3373 is not authentic:

PIISSIMAE AC FELICISSIMAE
DOMINAE NOSTRAE
HELENAE AUGUSTAE
GENETRICI
D N FL VAL CONSTANTINI
PROPAGATORIS IMPERII ROMANI
TRIUMPHATORIS SEMPER AUGUSTI
P IANUARIUS PRIMUS V C
CORR APULIAE CORR CAMPANIAE
COS
MAIESTATI EIUS
DICATISSIMUS

The inscription was made by Galletti. It greatly resembles *CIL* X 517 = *ILS* 708, which was discovered by Galletti. Also *CIL* X 1484 may be false; see below pp. 51-52.

TINI ET CONSTANTI BEATIS
SIMORUM AC FLORENTIS
SIMORUM CAESARUM
IULIUS MAXIMILIANUS V C COMES
PIETATI EIUS SEMPER DICATIS(SIMUS)

This inscription, found in the garden of the church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme and inscribed on a marble base, has a *terminus post quem* of 324 because of the use of the title Augusta. In his commentary H. Dessau thinks it should even be dated to the second half of 326 or later because Crispus, unlike his half-brothers Constantius and Constantine, is not referred to as Caesar. Crispus was executed on the order of his father Constantine, probably in May 326. The identity of Iulius Maximilianus, the man who dedicated the inscription and the accompanying statue, is uncertain. From the inscription itself it emerges that he was a *vir clarissimus*—thus he belonged to the senatorial order—and held the position of *comes*. Since Constantine's reign a *comes* was an official confidant in the service of the emperor, who was entrusted with a wide range of duties. Later on these duties were categorized and divided and the *comes rerum privatarum*, *comes Orientis*, *comes domesticorum*, etc. came into being. The title *comes* could also be given in honorary form and in that case the position had little practical meaning.²⁸ In Maximilianus' case it is not known with what specific office his title is to be associated. Later in his career, he may have held the position of *consularis aquarum*.²⁹ The marble base with the inscription now stands in the Helena-chapel of S. Croce in Gerusalemme. A hole in the upper surface of the base shows where the statue, now lost, was once fixed.³⁰

CIL VI 1135:

DOMINAE NOSTRAE VENERABILI
HELENAE AUGUSTAE
GENETRICI D N CONSTANTINI MAXIMI
VICTORIS ET TRIUMPHATORIS SEMPER AUGUSTI
[F]LPI[ST]IUS V P P P PRIVATARUM
PIETATI EORUM SEMPER DEVOTISSIMUS

This inscription, discovered *post basilicam Lateranensem iuxtae sacellum quod dicitur Sancta Sanctorum* and written on a marble base, is also to be dated after 324. Unfortunately, the inscription was lost after

²⁸ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, 104-105.

²⁹ *PLRE* I, 575; *CTh* 15.2.1 (May 18, 330).

³⁰ I. Lavin, 1967b. See Appendix for statues of Helena.

its discovery. There is no information in the sources about Flavius Pistius apart from what we learn from this inscription.³¹ He was a *vir perfectissimus* and a *praepositus rerum privatarum* in c. 325-330. As *perfectissimus* he was a member of the *ordo equester*. There is uncertainty about his duties. According to A.H.M. Jones, the main task of an official of the *res privata* was to administer and collect the rents of all land and property which belonged to the state, and to claim for the state and incorporate all property which fell to it. The *res privata* certainly had a post of *praepositus*, but the full job specification of the *praepositus rerum privatarum* is nowhere attested. *Praepositi* took care of the *bastaga privata*, the transport service of the *res privata* in both parts of the empire. In the east there were *praepositi* who looked after the herds and stables, presumably the famous stud farms.³²

CIL VI 1136:

D N HE[LENA VENERABILIS DO]MINI [N CONSTANTINI A]UG
MATER E[T] AVIA BEATIS[SIMOR ET FLORE]NTIS[SIMOR
CAESARUM NOSTR]ORU[M] THERM[AS INCENDIO
DE]STRU[CTAS RESTITUIT]

Part of this inscription was found in five fragments near the basilica of S. Croce in the sixteenth century. The reconstruction seems reliable. Because the title Augusta is not mentioned, it may be assumed that the text was composed before 324. Helena is called grandmother of the Caesars, with the implication that the inscription must have been set up at a time when at least two Caesars were known. On 1 March 317 Constantine's sons Crispus and Constantine were elevated to the rank of Caesar on occasion of the peace treaty between their father and Licinius.³³ The inscription is thus dated to the period between 1 March 317 and the autumn of 324, when Helena became an Augusta. According to the inscription, Helena had public baths repaired which were damaged by fire (the word *incendio* is reconstructed). These baths were located near the *Palatium Sessorianum* and are commonly known as the *Thermae Helenae*. Today the inscription belongs to the Vatican Museum, where the position of the inscription has been reconstructed. The marble tablet on which the text is inscribed is supported on each side by two *Victoriae* standing in a

³¹ *PLRE* I, 704.

³² A.H.M. Jones, 1964, 412, 414. The function of *praepositus rerum privatarum* is not mentioned by Jones.

³³ T.D. Barnes, 1981, 67; 1982, 83.

kind of niche.³⁴ It is likely that the inscription was placed at (one of) the entrance(s) of the restored baths.

It has been suggested by J.F. Merriman that the three inscriptions mentioned above are to be connected with the construction of an aquaduct which ran through the area of the *Palatium Sessorianum*. This aquaduct provided water for the *Thermae Helenae*, as well as for other public baths.³⁵ The aquaduct which was known as the *Aqua Augustea*, and which according to the traditional view was built in the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus (222-235) was in Merriman's opinion constructed under Helena's supervision. Merriman thinks that the construction of the aquaduct was begun at the same time as the restoration of the *Thermae Helenae*. Iulius Maximilianus, *consularis aquarum* in 330, as well as Flavius Pistius could well have performed important duties in the planning and building of the new aquaduct. To express their gratitude to their patron Helena, both set up commemorative statues in her honour. In Merriman's view, not only *CIL* VI 1134 and 1135 were dedicated to Helena by Pistius and Maximilianus, but also *CIL* VI 36903 and 36950. These inscriptions were also found, in fragments and severely damaged, in the neighbourhood of the Lateran and the church of S. Croce. So little is left of the text of *CIL* VI 36903, dedicated by Pistius, that the inscription cannot be reconstructed. Thus we do not know whether the inscription was actually set up in honour of Helena, as Merriman believes. Three fragments of *CIL* VI 36950 have been discovered. The reconstruction of the text suggests that the inscription was dedicated to Helena by Iulius Maximilianus.³⁶ It remains obscure whether or not these inscriptions (and statues) had anything to do with the construction of the *Aqua Augustea*.

³⁴ G. Lippold, 1936, Nr.586-591, 190-191.

³⁵ J.F. Merriman, 1977.

³⁶ *CIL* VI 36950:

D N PIISSI[MAE AC VENERABILI]
AUG FL [IUL HELENAE GENETRICI
D N CONSTANTINI MAXIMI VICTO
RIS AC TRIUMF]ATORIS SEM[PER
AUGUSTI AVIAE D] D NN CONST[AN
TINI ET CONS]TANTI BEA[TISSI
MORUM AC FLORENTISSIMORUM
CAESARU]M

...IUS M.....[V C
COM]ES DICA[TISSIMUS EXCELLEN
TIAE PIETATIQUE EIUS]

CIL X 678:

PIISSIMAE AC VENERAVI
LI D N FAUSTAE AUG
UXORI D N MAXIMI
VICTORIS AUG
CONSTANTINI /O/////

///// D D D N N N
[CRISPI] CONSTANTINI
CONSTANTI BAEA
TISSIMORUM [CAESARUM
RE]S P S[URRENTIN]OR

This inscription was originally set up in honour of Fausta by the people of Surrentum. After Fausta's *damnatio memoriae* in 326, the words FAUSTA and UXORI were replaced by HELENAE and MATRI. Crispus' name, also banned from official memory in 326, was removed too. In addition, Fausta's statue was probably replaced by one of Helena.³⁷

CIL VIII 1633:

DOMINAE
NOSTRAE
[FL]AVIAE
HELENAE
AUG
M VALER
GYPASII V C
CVR REIP ET D V DE
VOT NUMINI MA
IESTATIQUE EIUS

This inscription should be dated later than 324. In contrast to the other inscriptions, Helena is not mentioned here as mother of Constantine and grandmother of the Caesars, but only as Augusta. The dedicator, Marcus Valerius Gypasius was a *vir clarissimus* and as such belonged to the senatorial order. The abbreviation *CVR* could either mean that he was a *curator*, a manager of imperial possessions, or a *curialis*, a member of a city council. The last possibility is the more probable because of the use of *DV*, *duumvir*. A *duumvir* was one of the most important magistrates of a city, in this case probably the city of Sicca Veneria (modern El Kef in Tunisia), where the inscription was found, inscribed on a white marble base.

³⁷ See B. Ward-Perkins, 1984, Appendix 1.

CIL IX 2446:

HELENAE MATRI
DOMINI NOSTRI
CONSTANTINI
MAXIMI VICTO
RIS SEMPER AUG
ORDO ET POPULUS
SAEPINATIUM

This inscription, which can be dated before 324 because of the absence of the Augusta title and which was dedicated by the people of Saepinum, was discovered near the forum of the ancient town Altilia.³⁸ Found together with fragments of a statue, it was lost soon after its discovery. The content of the text is of little interest.

CIL X 517 = ILS 708:

DOMINAE NOSTRAE FLAVIAE AUGUSTAE
HELENAE DIVI CONSTANTII CASTISSIMAE
CONIUGI PROCREATRICI D N CONSTANTINI
MAXIMI PISSIMI AC VICTORIS AUGUSTI
AVIAE DOMINORUM NOSTRORUM CRISPI
ET CONSTANTINI ET CONSTANTII BEATISSI
MORUM AC FELICIUM CAESARUM
ALPINIUS MAGNUS V.C. CORR. LUCANIAE ET
BRITTIORUM STATUIT DEVOTUS EXCELLEN
TIAE PIETATIQUE EIUS

This inscription, discovered c.1725 in Salernum, can be dated between the autumn of 324 and May 326, the month of Crispus' execution. After his *damnatio memoriae* the name of Crispus was erased. Moreover, the date of the inscription can be assessed from the function of its dedicator, Alpinus Magnus. As the text reveals, Alpinus was *corrector* of Lucania and Bruttium at the time the inscription and statue were set up. From other sources we know that he held this office in the years 324-326.³⁹ It is curious that it was found in Salernum in southern Campania because, as far as is known, this territory did not belong to the sphere of influence of the *corrector* of Lucania and Bruttium. Alpinus was a distinguished person. He came from the Sicilian city Lilybaeum, where he was the *patronus*. He had been *praeses Corsicae* from 317 to 324. After his time in office as *corrector*, he became *consularis*

³⁸ Altilia and Saepinum are often taken to be one and the same city, although this does not seem to give the full picture; see *Kl. Pauly* 4, 1495.

³⁹ For the sources on Alpinus Magnus, see *PLRE* I, 534-535.

Siciliae. As *praeses*, a provincial governor of the lowest rank, he probably belonged to the equestrian order⁴⁰, but in his other two positions he is designated a *vir clarissimus*. As such he belonged to the senatorial aristocracy. His connection with Helena is not clear. Perhaps Helena had helped to advance his career. In this case the statue and inscription can be considered a token of Alpinus' gratitude.

CIL X 1483:

PIISSIMAE AC CLEMENTISSIMAE
DOMINAE NOSTRAE AUGUSTAE
HELENAE MATRI
DOMINI NOSTRI VICTORIS
SEMPER AUGUSTI CONSTAN
TINI ET AVIAE
DOMINORUM NOSTRORUM
CAESARUM BEATORUM
UXORI DIVI CONSTANTII
ORDO NEAPOLITANORUM
ET POPULUS

Inscribed on a stylobate, this inscription was discovered among the foundations of the basilica of S. Reati d. Resnati in Naples. It was dedicated by the magistrates and people of Naples and should be dated after 324. Perhaps Helena visited Naples to dedicate a basilica, an aquaduct and a forum, granted to the city by Constantine.⁴¹ The *ordo et populus* of Naples may well have set up the inscription on this occasion.

CIL X 1484:

PIISSIMAE AC VENERABILI
DOMINAE NOSTRAE HELAENAE
AUGUSTAE MATRI
DOMINI NOSTRI VICTORIS
SEMPER AUG. CONSTANTINI ET
AVIAE DOMINORUM NOSTRORUM
BEATISSIMORUM CAESARUM
ORDO ET POPULUS NEAPOLITANUS

This inscription is similar to *CIL* X 1483; only the words *uxori divi Constantii* are missing. It is not known exactly where and under what circumstances the inscription was discovered, only that it

⁴⁰ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, 45.

⁴¹ *Lib. Pont.* I, 186: *Eodem tempore fecit Constantinus Augustus basilicam in civitatem Neapolim ... Fecit autem formam aquaeductus per Milia VIII; fecit autem et forum in eadem civitatem*

was found in Naples. The inscription's use of *litterae semiantiquae et semilongobardicae* leads to the suspicion that the inscription is not genuine.

The inscriptions are not very informative where the life of Helena is concerned. However, they display some interesting features. Nearly all inscriptions call Helena *mater*, *genetrix* or *procreatrix* of Constantine and the grandmother (*avia*) of the Caesars. The emphasis on her position as (grand)mother of the invincible Constantine and the Caesars shows her place in the Constantinian dynasty. Especially Helena's position as mother was important.⁴² By making her the ancestress of the dynasty, Constantine justified his own rulership⁴³ and could invalidate the claim of the descendants of his father and his second wife Theodora.

As long as Helena lived, Constantine's half-brothers and half-sisters were not involved in the government of the empire, except for Constantia, who was married to Licinius in 313 for political reasons. Many scholars have posited the theory that Helena was to blame for the exclusion of the children of Constantius and Theodora from the government and even for their exile. Her motivation is supposed to have been jealousy, jealousy of Theodora, and hence of her children, for whom Constantius Chlorus had left Helena.⁴⁴ The sources, however, are unclear on this matter and there is in fact no evidence whatsoever that Helena was behind Constantine's decision not to involve his half-brothers in the business of government.⁴⁵

⁴² In the first and second century and under the Severan emperors the expressions *mater Augusti*, *mater Caesaris* and *genetrix* are often used to designate mothers of emperors in inscriptions, on coins and in literary sources; see H. Temporini, 1978, e.g. 6, 38 n.187, 39f., 46f., 63, 66, 104 n.454, 161, 174. In this way imperial women were given a position within the dynasty: *ibid.*, 47: "Auf mehrfache Weise erhalten also immer wieder auch kaiserliche Frauen eine Stelle innerhalb des dynastischen Formulars einer offiziellen kaiserlichen Nomenklatur, worin sich ihr eigener Stellenwert neben Männern der Dynastie ausdrückt."

⁴³ T. Grünewald, 1990, 138-139.

⁴⁴ E.g. J. Vogt, 1960², 248-249: "Die beherrschende Figur im constantinischen Haus war die Kaiserin-Mutter Helena. Seit 306 am Hof ihres Sohnes, hat sie es erreicht, dass die Stiefbrüder des Kaisers, solange sie lebte, in einer Art Verbannung gehalten werden." R. Browning, 1975, 31: "... Helena brooded over the insult that had been offered her, and brought up her son Constantine to hate his half-brothers." D. Bowder, 1978, 42-43: "The rest of the family ... had suffered from Helena's jealous displeasure during her lifetime, and had lived in retirement akin to exile ...". *RAC* s.v. Helena II, 356: "Sie benützte ihre Stellung, um die drei Söhne von Constantius u. Theodora ... aus jeglicher Machtsstellung entfernen u. an verschiedene Orte des Reiches verbannen zu lassen ...".

⁴⁵ The sources most often referred to in this respect are a small fragment of

Secondly, it is remarkable that all inscriptions are in Latin and that most of them are of Italian origin.⁴⁶ Only one, *CIL* VIII 1633, comes from Africa. The discovery of inscriptions referring to Helena in Rome can be explained by the fact that Rome was her domicile. Of the other Italian inscriptions three were found in cities on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea and another in Saepinum, which does not lie very far inland. The concentration of inscriptions dedicated to Helena in this region is hard to explain. Did Helena, like many distinguished persons living in the city of Rome, own a residence near Naples, where she spent the hot summer months? This would explain why she was better known in this area than in other parts of the empire.

As in the case of the coins, the increase in the number of inscriptions demonstrates Helena's rise in status and power after the autumn of 324. The title Augusta had its effect on the 'outside world'. Helena was now clearly considered one of the most important figures in the empire.⁴⁷ Dedicating a statue and inscription to the new Augusta was evidently considered a worthwhile project, which not only established a special link

Julian the Apostate's letter to the Corinthians, in which he compares the enforced wanderings of his father Julius Constantius with those of Odysseus (Fr. 4, ed. Tusculum, 203), and a speech of Libanius (*Or.* 14,30). However, Helena is not mentioned at all either in this letter or in Libanius' oration. About five years after Helena's death, Constantine was more willing to offer his half-brothers and their sons positions in the government. Flavius Dalmatius was consul in 333 and between the spring of 333 and the spring of 334 he was censor, an antique title that had been revived by Constantine. Julius Constantius was consul in 335 and in the same year Constantine bestowed on him the honorary titles *patricius* and *nobilissimus*. From 335 till 337, Flavius Dalmatius' eldest son was even Caesar and his second son Hannibalianus was presented by Constantine as a candidate for the Persian throne in his conflict with Shapur II. Hannibalianus had probably married Constantine's daughter Constantina and may have ruled over the territories of Pontus and Armenia. See T.D. Barnes, 1981, 259; 1982, 8, 105, 108.

⁴⁶ Helena's fame was probably not as great in the Greek East as in the Latin West. This would explain why no Greek inscriptions are attested, dedicated to Helena during her lifetime. However, there is a Greek inscription scratched on one of the walls of the basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro. The inscription is late (possibly sixth century) and Helena is called a saint by its dedicator, a pilgrim; see for the text of the inscription O. Marucchi, 1933, 318-319. E. de Ruggiero in his *Dizionario Epigrafico di Antichità Romane*, Roma 1900, II-1, 666, refers to *CIG* 3883^b for a Greek Helena-inscription. However, under this number no Helena-inscription is to be found in the *CIG*. The *CIG* does have five other inscriptions which mention Helena. Four (*CIG* 8694, 8742, 8765, 9070) are Christian inscriptions of a late date. *CIG* 4349, of unknown date, mentions Helena only as mother of Constantine.

⁴⁷ T. Grünewald, 1990, 143: "Münzen und Inschriften zeigen Übereinstimmend, dass die Damen des constantinischen Hauses [Helena und Fausta] eine dem Herrscher im Protokoll entsprechende Stellung einnahmen."

between the empress and the dedicator, but also increased the prestige of dedicator and dedicatee alike.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For the sake of completeness, one other inscription must be mentioned, i.e. the inscription on the lost golden cross which had once adorned the grave of St. Peter; see above p. 33, n. 42. This inscription illustrates Helena's Christian conviction. It has been suggested by H. Dörries, 1954, 284-285, that the above mentioned Latin inscriptions also show Helena's profound Christianity because she is described as *piissima*, *venerabilis* and *clementissima*. This suggestion does not convince. Qualifications such as these are religiously neutral and must mean something like 'righteous', 'respectable' and 'benevolent', without accompanying any Christian overtones.

CHAPTER FIVE

HELENA'S PILGRIMAGE

The most memorable event of Helena's life was her journey to Palestine and the other eastern provinces, undertaken when she was well into old age. This journey is generally looked upon as a pilgrimage. It is argued below that Helena most probably undertook her travels in order to propagate Christianity and to appease dissatisfaction concerning Constantine's policy of Christianization.

After his defeat of Licinius at Chrysopolis in 324, Constantine became sole ruler of the Roman Empire.¹ Immediately after his victory, Constantine set things right in the eastern provinces and carried out various reforms. In general his pro-Christian attitude is probably best demonstrated by his policy of building churches and his efforts to promote and maintain the unity of dogma within the Church. Even before 324, Constantine took the security of mankind and his own fear of the divine wrath so seriously, that he considered himself personally responsible for the promotion of a single religious creed within a still very divided Christian community. Revealing in this connection is a passage in a letter from the year 313, addressed to the prefect Aelafius in Africa, on the matter of the heretical movement of Donatism:

... I consider it absolutely contrary to the divine law that we should overlook such quarrels and contentions, whereby the Highest Divinity may perhaps be moved to wrath, not only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care He has, by His celestial will, committed the government of all earthly things, and that He may be so far moved as to take some untoward step. For I shall really and fully be able to feel secure and always to hope for prosperity and happiness from the ready kindness of the most mighty God, only when I see all venerating the most holy

¹ Initially, thanks to the pleas of his wife Constantia, Licinius' life was spared, but in the spring of 325, he died under obscure circumstances in Thessalonica; see T.D. Barnes, 1982, 44-45. Zonaras, *Epit.* 13,1, suggests Licinius committed suicide. According to Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* I 4 = PG 67, 40, and Theophanes, *Chronographia* 20, 5-8, he was put to death by Constantine because he was preparing another rebellion. His son Licinius, proclaimed Caesar in 317, was also removed from office and was probably killed at the same time as his father.

God in the proper cult of the catholic religion with harmonious brotherhood of worship.²

This passage is crucial to Constantine's own attitude towards religious dissent and his policy regarding heretical movements.³ It makes quite clear that already early in his reign, Constantine felt responsible for the dogmatic unity of the Christian religion.

Soon after becoming sole ruler of the empire, Constantine was faced with a serious difference of opinion between the bishops in the eastern provinces who could not come to an agreement concerning the nature of Christ. This Arian controversy threatened not only the unity of Christian belief, but also the unity of the state. It was thus important as much for political as religious reasons that the bishops should reach a consensus of opinion concerning creed. In order to encourage an agreement, Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea in 325. He himself was prominently present at this religious council and actively took part in the debates. Although the bishops agreed at last on a common Christological dogma, expressed in the Nicene creed, the council did not have the desired effect. Arianism could not be banned and, like other heretical sects, continued to threaten the unity of the Christian faith.⁴

Constantine's Christian faith is also demonstrated practically in his policy of building churches. Many churches were built in Rome and Italy after 312⁵ and this policy was continued on an

² Optatus Miletivanus, *Libri VII*, Appendix III = *CSEL* 26, 206. Transl. A.H.M. Jones, 1972, 112-113.

³ A.H.M. Jones, 1972, 113: "This passage is the key to Constantine's whole religious position. He believed that the Highest Divinity, whom the Christian Church worshipped, had given him victory and dominion; he hoped by doing His will to win by His favour further prosperity for himself and his subjects, and he feared of offending Him to be cast down from power and to involve the empire in his ruin." See also R. Lane Fox, 1986, 625.

⁴ Constantine, who possibly underestimated the Arian movement, had initially commissioned Ossius of Cordoba to solve the problems with the Arians. In Alexandria Ossius tried in vain to reconcile Arius and his orthodox bishop Alexander. Meanwhile Ossius had come to the conclusion that Arianism was not a local heresy but that it had spread all over the eastern provinces. Therefore, on returning from Alexandria to Nicomedia, he brought the matter up at a synod in Antioch in the spring of 325; see J.R. Nyman, 1961. Eventually a great council was necessary. This meeting of bishops at Nicaea was presided over by Ossius, but Constantine himself was also present at the discussions. His presence was of the greatest importance in reconciling Arian and non-Arian bishops and in establishing unity of dogma. Unity of the Church was also important for political stability. For Constantine's influence at the Council of Nicaea, see T.D. Barnes, 1978, 54-57. For other heresies during Constantine's reign, see *VC* III 63-66.

⁵ See *Lib. Pont.* I, 172ff.

even greater scale after Constantine's conquest of the eastern part of the empire. Orders were given to build new churches to receive the expected influx of converts. The new basilicas were built on a larger scale than the existing churches.⁶ The eastern bishops received notice that they could look to government officials for all possible help with the construction of new churches.⁷ Particularly famous is the emperor's letter to Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, concerning the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Neither expense nor effort were spared for this basilica. Constantine remarks in his letter that this church was to surpass all other churches in beauty and richness of decoration. Constantine asked Macarius to make a list of the number of working men, the kind of construction materials and the amounts of money he needed; he could have all he asked for.⁸ Constantine's building policy was particularly intensively implemented in Palestine, the Christian Holy Land. Not only was a church built over Christ's tomb, but also over the cave where Christ was born in Bethlehem, while on the Mount of Olives a basilica of great splendour arose.⁹ By building these resplendent churches Constantine tried to exceed the pomp and circumstance of the pagan temples, to surpass paganism on behalf of Christianity, and to display himself and the Christian faith as victorious.¹⁰ Constantine's building policy was obviously a propaganda instrument used for 'promoting' Christianity.¹¹ Constantine seems quite consciously to have wanted to make Palestine, and particularly Jerusalem, one of the centres, if not *the* centre, of Christianity. Constantine's attention and concern for the land of origin of the Christian faith, brought Palestine into the limelight of the world.¹²

Constantine speeded up his policy of Christianization after he had acquired sole power in 324. His reforms clearly demonstrate his intention to turn the empire into a Christian state. To that

⁶ *VC* II 46.

⁷ *VC* III 29.

⁸ *VC* III 31-32. In comparison with the basilicas in Rome, the churches of the Holy Land were considerably smaller, but had surprisingly large open courtyards. These open areas, surrounded by colonnades, may have been especially designed to accommodate pilgrims; see E.D. Hunt, 1982, 20-21.

⁹ *VC* III 41.

¹⁰ J. Wilkinson, 1981, 13. The basilica in Nicomedia also expresses the idea of victory. It was built to celebrate the defeat of Licinius, not only Constantine's but also God's enemy (*VC* III 50).

¹¹ For churches as means of propagating Christianity, see R. Krautheimer, 1967, 128.

¹² See W. Telfer, 1957.

end Christianity and individual Christians were favoured, while pagan cults and pagans were handicapped. In the eighteen months after Chrysopolis the inhabitants of the eastern provinces were made sharply aware of Constantine's Christian convictions and his pro-Christian policy. Christianity came out more into the open and was more conspicuous than ever before. New and remarkable as this policy was for a Roman emperor, perhaps even more striking were the letters which Constantine sent to his subjects in the eastern provinces. These unsolicited letters were a new medium of communication between an emperor and his subjects. Two of these letters were passed down by Eusebius: the so-called First and Second Letter to the Eastern Provincials.¹³ The First Letter mostly concerns measures against the pagans and specific privileges for the Christians. Constantine nominated new governors, most of whom were Christians. Lesser pagan officials were replaced by Christian dignitaries. Pagan governors and senior officials were forbidden to sacrifice while on duty.¹⁴ Those who had been sent into exile during Licinius' reign because of their Christian convictions were free to return to their homes. Those who for the same reason had lost their civil rights and were employed as slaves in the mines were released and restored to their civic rights. Those who had lost their military rank because of their Christianity were given the choice either to take up their former office in the army or to live as free civilians. Those who had been convicted by Licinius to slave labour in wool or weaving mills, also regained their freedom. Confiscated goods of private Christians or of the churches, were to be restored. The setting up of cult statues was no longer allowed and it was forbidden to consult oracles.¹⁵ The Second Letter to the Provincials sketches the emperor's views of his faith. It explains recent history and Christian theology but also speaks about the freedom of taking part in pagan cults allowed to those who were not yet convinced by the Christian truth. Although Constantine was no supporter of enforced conversions, it is obvious that within a short period of time great changes took place in the East, for pagans as well as Christians.

¹³ First Letter: *VC* II 24-42; Second Letter: *VC* II 48-60. The First Letter was written soon after Chrysopolis while the Second Letter was posted early in 325. See R. Lane Fox, 1986, 635ff.

¹⁴ *VC* II 44. Eusebius alleges that Constantine banned all sacrifices by law, but this is questionable; see R. Lane Fox, 1986, 667; R.M. Errington, 1988.

¹⁵ *VC* II 31-34, 37, 44, 45. See also T.D. Barnes, 1984. For Licinius' measures against and persecutions of Christians see Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* X 8; *VC* I 49-56, II 1-2.

Except for a short period under Galerius and the first years of Licinius' rule, the Christians in the East experienced freedom of religion for the first time, whereas the pagans now felt what it meant to be limited in practising their cults.

Constantine did not have much time to carry out his religious reforms. In the spring of 326 he left for Rome to celebrate his *Vicennalia*.¹⁶ His stay in the East was too short to shape and implement his policy in a convincing way and to make the changes permanent. After his return to the West, queries about Constantine's reforms must have arisen in the eastern provinces. It would have been Helena's task on her 'pilgrimage' to help to solve these problems.

Where Helena stayed during Constantine's triumphant campaign against Licinius is not clear. Since she was proclaimed Augusta soon after Chrysopolis, it may be that she was with her son during the war against Licinius. However, from the epigraphic evidence from Rome and Italy mentioned in the previous chapter, it is obvious that she did not remain in the East. If in fact she accompanied Constantine on his campaign against Licinius, she must have returned to her *Palatium Sessorianum* in Rome soon after victory.¹⁷

Mother and son no doubt met in Rome in the summer of 326.¹⁸ Helena as a leading member of the Constantinian dynasty definitely took part in the celebrations organised for Constantine's *Vicennalia* during this year. Notwithstanding the festivities, 326 was not a memorable year for the imperial house as a whole. However, for Helena personally in some respects it was. In this year she became the first and only important imperial lady at Constantine's court, but only as a consequence of tragic circumstances in her family circle, which cast a dark shadow over Constantine's reign.

After his victory at Chrysopolis, Constantine deliberately pursued the identification of his family with the reunified empire. For that purpose his sons were made *Caesares* and his wife and mother received the title Augusta. Constantine presented his family to his subjects as a harmonious entity which symbolized and guaranteed the unity and concord of the empire. The welfare of the state was presented as a reflection of the well-being and happiness of the Constantinian family.¹⁹

¹⁶ T.D. Barnes, 1982, 77.

¹⁷ E.D. Hunt, 1982, 30-31.

¹⁸ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,2.

¹⁹ See above pp. 41-42.

When the unity of the imperial family is so closely connected with the unity of the state, political danger arises as soon as the harmony within the emperor's family changes to discord. In 326 Constantine was faced with great family problems. The emperor put his son Crispus and his wife Fausta to death one after the other.²⁰ The motives behind these executions are not clear and there has therefore been much speculation. It has been suggested that the execution of Crispus—he was probably killed by poison in Pola in May 326²¹—was a dynastic murder.²² Constantine may have planned to pass on his imperial power only to his legitimate sons, i.e. the sons he had had with Fausta. Crispus, son of Constantine's concubine Minervina²³ and his eldest son, constituted a serious obstacle to the succession for his legitimate sons. Crispus therefore, had to be removed. This conjecture is not altogether plausible because it does not explain why Fausta was also killed. It is clear from an early source that both executions were connected.²⁴

According to another view Crispus, who had very good prospects as statesman and military commander,²⁵ had his fortune told and his future predicted.²⁶ Fausta, who must have discovered this, presented the fortune-telling as a conspiracy against Constantine. As soon as Constantine was notified, he quickly executed Crispus and banned him from official memory. Too quickly however, because further investigations made clear that Crispus had been no danger whatsoever to the position of his father. This discovery caused Constantine to execute Fausta, because she was held responsible for Crispus' death. This theory does not explain why Crispus' *damnatio memoriae* was not reversed when it came out he was completely innocent. Besides, there is no explanation why Constantine should have wanted to endanger his position further by executing Fausta, who according to the legend on her coins

²⁰ Eutropius, *Brev.* 10,6,3; Hieronymus, *De Vir. Ill.* 80; Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,2.

²¹ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,2; Amm. Marc. 14,11,20; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 5,8,2. T.D. Barnes, 1982, 84. For other proposed dates, see H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 99.

²² P. Guthrie, 1966.

²³ For Minervina, see X. Lucien-Brun, 1970.

²⁴ Inc. auct., *Ep. de Caes.* 41, 11-12.

²⁵ Crispus had undertaken successful campaigns against the Franks and Alamanni in 320 and 323. By defeating Licinius' fleet in 324, Crispus contributed significantly to Constantine's victory over his rival. See H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 87-89.

²⁶ Eutropius, *Brev.* 10,6,3. See for this view N.J.E. Austin, 1980.

figured as the *spes rei publicae*.

Another theory is that the family drama was caused by Crispus urging his father to resign from the throne after twenty years, just as Diocletian had done, in favour of the younger *Caesares*, i.e. Crispus himself. With this proposal Crispus would certainly have signed his own death-warrant.²⁷ This explanation ignores the connection between the death of Crispus and that of Fausta.

The most accepted explanation for both murders is given by Zosimus and later by Zonaras. Both tell of a sexual relationship between Crispus and Fausta, which for Constantine had been the motive for killing Crispus.²⁸ Helena, who was very attached to her eldest grandson, took the loss of the young man very hard.²⁹ She held Fausta responsible for Crispus' misfortune. To console her, Constantine corrected one evil by an even greater one: Fausta was murdered. On her husband's order she was suffocated in a bath(room) heated far beyond the normal temperature.³⁰ Afterwards, according to Zosimus, Constantine regretted his murderous acts and sought forgiveness. He approached pagan priests to ask for pardon, but they considered his behaviour so inhumanly cruel that they could not help him. At last, an Egyptian advised him to become a Christian because the Christian priests forgave any sin, no matter how great.³¹ In this way Constantine became a Christian. This story about Constantine's conversion was not made up by Zosimus. Sozomen, who wrote his *Church History* about fifty years before Zosimus, already knew it. It circulated in the Greek-speaking part of the empire and according to Sozomen, it had been invented by people who wanted to malign the Christian faith.³² Sozomen states that the story was devised by "the Greeks", by which he means the pagans. It is not unrealistic to suppose that the origin of the tale went back to

²⁷ J. Burckhardt, 1898³, 356, n.1, among others, considered this running of things "sehr wohl denkbar".

²⁸ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,1-2; Zonaras, *Epit.* 13,2,38-41. Already at the beginning of the nineteenth century J.C.F. Manso, 1817, 66-67, preferred this explanation. According to J. Vogt, 1960², 250, this explanation is all the more logical because "... der Kaiser ... [hatte] gerade in diesem Jahr (326) strenge Gesetze zum Schutz der Ehe und der Keuschheit erlassen ...".

²⁹ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,2; Inc. auct., *Ep. de Caes.* 41,12.

³⁰ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,2; Inc. auct., *Ep. de Caes.* 41,11-12; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epist.* 5,8,2; Philostorgius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 4; Zonaras, XIII 2, 38-41. According to John Chrysostom, *Phil. Comm.* 4,15,5 = PG 62, 295, Constantine killed his wife by leaving her tied naked in the mountains as easy prey for wild animals.

³¹ Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* 2,29,3-4; see also Julian the Apostate, *Caesars* 336 AB.

³² Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* I 5,1-2.

Constantine's own time. Constantine's pro-Christian policy in the East must have undoubtedly had many opponents and his measures must have made him many enemies among pagans and former protégés of Licinius. The story was therefore most probably invented among circles of his opponents in the East.³³

There is no satisfactory explanation, ancient or modern, for the executions of Crispus and Fausta.³⁴ Their deaths still remain and will probably always remain an unsolved mystery. However, it is clear that great problems shook the foundations of Constantine's family and that the only solution apparently available for Constantine was to execute his wife and son. Their subsequent *damnatio memoriae* and the complete absence of any reference to both of them in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, only stress the seriousness of the problems in 326.

Questions have inevitably been raised about Helena's involvement in Fausta's death. H.A. Pohlsander considers it quite credible that Helena had a hand in Fausta's death, because the women were rivals on several counts. Helena was very fond of Crispus, whereas Fausta favoured her own sons. Fausta must have resented the domination of the court by her mother-in-law, while Helena resented Fausta because she was the half-sister of Theodora, who had replaced Helena as Constantius Chlorus' consort.³⁵ There is no real evidence for these allegations. The sources provide no evidence either for possible motives behind Helena's support for the killing of Fausta.³⁶ If any rivalry ever existed between Fausta and Helena, especially over the position of first lady at Constantine's court, it is obvious that this was no longer an issue after Fausta's death. Helena was from then on the most important woman at court and perhaps even her son's co-regent.³⁷ As such

³³ Though sources are not available, F. Paschoud, 1971, thinks that the story was devised in the first half of the fourth century. Its origin is the starting-point of an anti-Constantine 'tradition' in some pagan sources of Late Antiquity. Zosimus is an exponent of this tradition.

³⁴ Orosius, *Adv. Pag.* 7,28,23ff., even thought that Crispus was killed because he felt sympathy for Arianism. This is a very peculiar explanation when one knows that Helena was most probably sympathetic towards Arianism and that on his deathbed Constantine was baptized by the Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. Moreover, there are no indications that Arians were officially persecuted.

³⁵ H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 106.

³⁶ Remarkably enough H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 106, does not speculate about the motives for Crispus' death. He only concludes that "Crispus must have committed, or at least have been charged with, some especially shocking offence to earn him a sentence of death from his own father."

³⁷ Sulpicius Severus, *Chron.*, 33,5: ... *mater principis Constantini, quae Augusta cum*

she travelled to the eastern provinces shortly after the celebrations of Constantine's *Vicennalia* and the killing of Crispus and Fausta.³⁸

Eusebius is the only contemporary author who gives a report of Helena's journey. Paragraphs 42-47 of Book III of his *Vita Constantini* are dedicated to her travels. His description is presented as a subsection of his account of Constantine's church-building activities in the East. Paragraphs III 25-41 concern the Constantinian basilicas in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives, while the paragraphs directly after the paragraph about Helena deal with the building of churches in Constantinople, Nicomedia, Mamre and other places (III 48-51). Though it seems illogical to give an account of Helena's travels in the context of the construction of churches, it is very easy to understand why Eusebius did so. The building of churches was a very important aspect of Constantine's policy of Christianization. The construction of churches in Palestine in particular had his full attention. After all, this was the land in which Christianity had originated. During her stay in the Holy Land, Helena was certainly involved in the construction of churches which was going on in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. However, it would be going too far to suggest that she was responsible for the actual foundation of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem and of the Church on the Mount of Olives.³⁹ Eusebius' use of words may have led to confusion here. In *VC* III 43, he states that Helena dedicated these two churches to God and endowed them with many gifts. This statement could be understood as an actual founding of the churches by the empress-mother. Concerning the church on the Mount of Olives, Eusebius even states that it was built by Helena. But in another section of his *VC* (III 41), Eusebius is perfectly clear about the fact that Constantine had decided churches should be built in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives. In his *Laus Constantini*, Eusebius also states explicitly that the emperor himself founded the churches in Palestine.⁴⁰ From the report of the Bordeaux-pilgrim, who visited

filio conregnabat ...; Paulinus van Nola, *Epist.* 31,4: ... *nomini conregnans Augustae eum regnabat* J. Vogt, 1960², 248-249, even calls her "die beherrschende Figur im constantinischen Haus."

³⁸ A. Piganiol, 1972², 39. As implied by E.D. Hunt, 1982, 35, she probably travelled with the court from Rome to Constantinople, whence she travelled 'on her own'. By way of Spoleto, Milan, Aquileia, Sirmium and Thessalonica, Constantinople was reached in the spring of 327 (T.D. Barnes, 1982, 77).

³⁹ T.D. Barnes, 1981, 248: "The emperor's mother founded the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, and a church on the Mount of Olives to commemorate Christ's ascension into heaven." For the Church of Nativity, see e.g. A.M. Schneider, 1941, 74-91; for the church on the Mount of Olives, see e.g. L.H. Vincent, 1957 and L.H. Vincent, F.M. Abel, 1912-1914, vol.1, 328-419.

⁴⁰ Eusebius, *LC* IX 17: "In this same region [Palestine], he recovered three

Palestine in 333, shortly after Helena, it is clear that all Palestinian churches were built on the order of Constantine.⁴¹ The pilgrim Egeria, who stayed in Palestine between 381 and 384, says quite plainly that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was built by Constantine and that it was decorated with gold, mosaic and precious marble under the supervision of his mother.⁴² Although the founding of churches by Helena in Palestine is a recurring theme in historically unreliable late-antique and medieval legendry,⁴³ it seems that no churches were in fact built on Helena's initiative. The foundation of churches must be seen as a part of the policy of Christianizing the empire. This policy was initiated and executed by Constantine, which makes him solely responsible for the actual foundation of the Christian churches. Of course, Helena had her share in this policy, but her contribution was definitely a minor one.⁴⁴ It is therefore more likely that Helena inspected the progress being made in building Palestine's most important basilicas during her stay in the Land of Christ and that she endowed them with suitable gifts.⁴⁵ It might even be that this

sites revered for three mystical caves, and enhanced them with opulent structures. On the cave of the first theophany he conferred appropriate marks of honor [= Church of Nativity in Bethlehem]; at the one where the ultimate ascension occurred he consecrated a memorial on the mountain ridge [= Church on the Mount of Olives]; between these, at the scene of the great struggle, signs of salvation and victory [= Church of the Holy Sepulchre]." Transl. H.A. Drake, 1976, 101.

⁴¹ *It. Burd.* 594,2; 595,6; 598,7; 599,5.

⁴² *It. Egeriae* 25,9.

⁴³ F. Nau, 1905.

⁴⁴ E.D. Hunt, 1982, 37.

⁴⁵ It is difficult to determine when exactly the construction of the churches in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives started. It could be that the actual building began in Helena's presence. The construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre had already begun in 325/6, thus before Helena arrived in Palestine. Probably at the Council of Nicaea (325), Macarius mentioned to Constantine the existence of the Lord's Tomb, which since Hadrian's time was covered by a temple of Aphrodite beside the forum of Aelia Capitolina (= Jerusalem); see E.D. Hunt, 1982, 7. Soon after the council, the emperor must have given orders for the demolition of the pagan temple and the construction of the basilica. The knowledge of the location of Christ's grave, lying very close to Golgotha, was from the first century passed on from generation to generation (C. Couasnon, 1974, 8-11). The complex which arose at the holy site consisted of the Constantinian basilica, often called Martyrium, and the so-called Rotunda or Anastasis. This latter structure covered the Tomb of the Lord and was, by way of an inner courtyard, connected with the actual church. The basilica was officially dedicated in 335 in the presence of Constantine himself, but had probably already been finished some years earlier (*It. Burd.* 594, 1-4). At the time of Eusebius' death (c.340) the Anastasis seems not have yet been completed (C. Couasnon, 1974, 15). The Anastasis, though remodelled through the centuries, still exists. The basilica was destroyed in 1009.

was one of the purposes of her visit to Palestine.

Apart from supervising the building of the churches in Palestine, Helena's journey also had other aims. Her sojourn in Palestine is commonly considered a pilgrimage.⁴⁶ Eusebius' presentation of her travels gives the impression that Helena's journey was motivated by faith. This emerges most clearly from a passage where Eusebius, quoting *Psalm* 132.7, refers to the fact that Helena wished to pray at the places where Christ's feet had touched the ground.⁴⁷ This idea of a pilgrimage is stressed by other remarks of Eusebius. He describes at length her piety, her humility, her good deeds, her generosity and her charity.⁴⁸ A superficial reading of the passages about Helena in the *VC* certainly gives the impression that Helena's only purpose was to visit the holy places and to display her Christian benevolence. This impression of the empress-mother who, driven by religious enthusiasm, undertook a tiresome journey in her old age in order to display her devotion, is oversimplified. Eusebius describes only that part of her journey—i.e. her stay in Palestine—with which he was most familiar and which interested him from the Christian point of view. It is probable that he himself, as metropolitan bishop of Palestine, was a member of Helena's retinue when she traversed his province. But Helena's journey was not restricted to Palestine, but included in fact a visit to all the eastern provinces, as Eusebius himself states.⁴⁹ She did not travel as a humble pilgrim but as an Augusta. This means that the motives of her journey were not only religious but also definitely secular.⁵⁰ And although Eusebius wants his reading public to believe Helena came to the East as a pilgrim, her travelling around the eastern half of the empire also must be looked at from a worldly perspective. But what kind of non-religious motives could there have been?

⁴⁶ In Late Antiquity the purport of a pilgrimage was not what it was in the Middle Ages. Pilgrimages were not undertaken as a penance or to become a better Christian (see E.D. Hunt, 1982, 91-92), but in order to come into contact with the places where Christ once had lived and suffered (e.g. Paulinus of Nola, *Epist.* 49,14), to experience the historicity of the Bible (see Hunt, 1982, 92-93 on Origen's interest for biblical places) or to 'experience' the holy sites as symbols of salvation (*ibid.*, 88ff. on Gregory of Nyssa's visit to the Holy Land).

⁴⁷ *VC* III 42.

⁴⁸ *VC* III 42, 44, 45.

⁴⁹ *VC* III 42.

⁵⁰ Worldly or political motives for her journey have hardly ever been looked at. Earlier studies of Helena (e.g. A.-M. Rouillon, 1908; R. Couzard, 1911; J. Maurice, 1930) but also recent ones (e.g. *RAC* s.v. Helena II, 358), all consider Helena's journey to have been a pilgrimage. Only E.D. Hunt, 1982, 35ff., alludes to other than religious motives.

VC III 42 may give a clue. Eusebius alleges in this paragraph that Helena came to the East to pray for her son and grandsons. Why should Helena have undertaken such a long journey when she only wanted to pray for the well-being of the male members of her family? An answer could be that there was unrest in the East and Constantine's rule was challenged. The unrest and discontent in the eastern provinces was most probably caused by the sudden change of religious policy after Constantine's defeat of Licinius. It is known that in the western half of the empire Constantine's pro-Christian attitude was not approved of by every subject, especially not by the Roman senators. When he became sole ruler in the West in 312, the number of Christians was still very small. This meant that Constantine had to manoeuvre very carefully when it came to propagating Christianity. He could not afford to become estranged from his subjects because of his policy of Christianization. In the East, where the number of Christians was greater than in the West, though still considerably small in comparison with the number of pagans, Constantine operated differently. After his victory at Chrysopolis, he openly propagated the Christian faith. He sent letters to the inhabitants of the eastern provinces declaring and defending his choice of Christianity, stating that Christians were to be given preferential treatment over pagans and that he would pray for the conversion of pagans. In competition with the pagan cults, he built magnificent churches which made Christianity 'visible'.⁵¹ He devastated sanctuaries, like, for instance, the temple of Aphrodite in Jerusalem and a shrine in Mamre.⁵² He sent *comites* to pagan sanctuaries and to pagan priests in every town and village of the eastern empire to confiscate everything of worth.⁵³ He prohibited governors of provinces, *vicarii* of dioceses and *praefecti praetorii* from bringing their usual sacrifices in their official capacity. It became forbidden to set up new cult statues and to consult oracles. The reforms were rigorous and "it may be argued that in 324 Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and that he carried

⁵¹ Before Constantine's reign Christian cult places were hidden away in private houses (*domus ecclesiae*) and outside the city walls at graves of martyrs. Even after 312 Constantine was careful not to confront his western subjects too openly with Christianity. E.g. no churches were built in the (pagan) centre of Rome, but they all arose on the outskirts of the city; see R. Krautheimer, 1983, 7ff.

⁵² VC III 26, 52-56, 58. See A. Alföldi, 1948, 108, for the devastation of temples.

⁵³ VC III 54; LC VIII 1; cf. T.D. Barnes, 1981, 247. The *Origo Constantini* 34, even (incorrectly) alleges Constantine issued an edict to close all pagan temples.

through a systematic and coherent reformation, at least in the eastern provinces which he conquered in 324 as a professed Christian in a Christian crusade against the last of the persecutors [i.e. Licinius]."⁵⁴ Apparently the prudence which characterized Constantine's policy of Christianization before 324 was not his trademark after he had conquered the East.

This policy of propagating Christianity and suppressing the pagan cults did not enjoy the support of many of Constantine's eastern subjects. Lack of time probably made it impossible for Constantine to implement his policy in a proper way and to suppress the unrest provoked by his plans in the period between the battle at Chrysopolis and his return to the West in the spring of 326. In addition to these difficulties, Constantine was faced with the problem of Arianism and other heresies, which threatened the unity of Christendom and were therefore of no help to his policy of Christianization. Back in Rome the executions of Crispus and Fausta endangered the unity of the Constantinian family, symbol of the unity of the Roman Empire. Their deaths must have caused Constantine great political embarrassment. It is hard to say whether there was a causal connection between the executions, the turmoil in the East and Helena's journey.⁵⁵ The sources do not indicate such a causality. The murders of 326 undoubtedly worsened the situation in the East, but the unrest was chiefly caused by Constantine's religious policy. To appease the inhabitants of the eastern provinces and to make his policy of Christianization acceptable, not only did Constantine himself return to Constantinople, but the Augusta herself went in person to the eastern provinces.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ T.D. Barnes, 1984, 70; see also T.D. Barnes, 1981, 210ff., 245ff.; R. Lane Fox, 1986, 635ff.

⁵⁵ It has often been suggested that Helena's journey/pilgrimage was an "act of reparation" for a purely domestic upheaval. See H. Chadwick, 1948, 32ff.; A. Piganiol, 1950, 91; T.D. Barnes, 1981, 221; E.D. Hunt, 1982, 33-34. However, there is no evidence at all to suppose a direct connection between Helena's journey and the tragic events of 326.

⁵⁶ There may possibly also have been unrest among the Jews in Palestine. Not only will they have felt uncomfortable about the building of many churches in their homeland and the Christianization of Palestine, but Constantine also revived laws of Hadrian against the Jews which had fallen into disuse; see M. Avi-Yonah, 1976, 163-164. John Chrysostom, *Adv. Iudaeos* V 11 = PG 48, 900, alleges that during the reign of Constantine the Jews rebelled and tried to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. There is no other source which confirms Chrysostom's statement. Probably he confused Constantine's name with that of Constantius II. During the latter's reign, the Jews revolted in 351 against his co-ruler Gallus Caesar.

That she was indeed sent to the East to restore peace can be inferred from *VC* III 42 and 44. Here Eusebius describes Helena's benevolence. She gave generously to all individuals who approached her, to cities and to army units. The helpless poor she provided with money and clothing. She released those who suffered in prisons and in the mines. Those who were exiled were free to return to their homes. The financial means for these benefactions were provided by Constantine; he had given his mother permission to spend freely from the imperial treasury.⁵⁷ From Eusebius' Christian perspective, the acts of charity no doubt characterized the pious empress who was conscious of the needs of her subjects. But her charity could well have been motivated by considerations of a political nature.

Eusebius' list of Helena's charitable actions raises questions. In the first place, why should she have given large endowments—probably money—to army units? It was very unusual for soldiers to be given a *donativum* for no apparent reason. During the reign of Diocletian and Constantine it was common for soldiers to receive, besides their poor annual *stipendium*, regular donatives on the birthdays and accession days of *Augusti* and *Caesares*, and also on occasion of their consulates.⁵⁸ Donatives were also distributed among soldiers when a co-ruler was endowed with an honorary title, in the case of adoption and on the occasion of an imperial marriage.⁵⁹ Donatives were also granted to prevent rebellious soldiers from plundering and to encourage their submission.⁶⁰ At the time of Helena's journey, there was nothing special to celebrate, apart, perhaps, from a birthday of a member of the imperial house hardly worth mentioning. The festivities for the occasion of Constantine's *Vicennalia* had come to an end, no member of the Constantinian family received honorary titles in this period and there were no marriages to celebrate. That only leaves the option of dissatisfied, rebellious soldiers. Their discontentment might have been caused by Constantine's religious reforms and his harsh measures against Licinius' political friends and Licinius himself, under whom many of these soldiers had served.⁶¹ Should we conclude that Helena gave richly to several military units in order to conciliate them and make them loyal to

⁵⁷ *VC* III 47.

⁵⁸ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, 623ff.; F. Millar, 1977, 195-196.

⁵⁹ Cassius Dio 78,34,2; *Hist. Aug., Hadr.* 23,12,14; *Hist. Aug., Ant. Pius* 10.

⁶⁰ Tacitus, *Hist.* 36,38; Cassius Dio 79,1,1.

⁶¹ After Chrysopolis many of Licinius' supporters were court-martialled and executed (*VC* II 18).

Constantine? Constantine needed the loyalty of his eastern soldiers badly, not only for internal political reasons but also because of the external military menace posed by the Persians.

The second point which raises questions is Helena's release of prisoners, exiles and those condemned to the mines. They had all lost their freedom through the agency of the powerful, maintains Eusebius.⁶² This remark of the bishop seems as strange as Helena's actions. Why should she have wanted to release people when Constantine, after his defeat of Licinius, already had freed all who were imprisoned, exiled or convicted to slave-labour because of their Christian conviction?⁶³ Were Christians again convicted, imprisoned or exiled during Constantine's stay in Rome, or are Helena's actions to be regarded as the resumption of Constantine's unfinished policy of liberation? The question cannot be answered for want of evidence. It is hardly imaginable that Helena released common criminals. It is therefore safest to assume that Helena resumed Constantine's policy and released the still imprisoned and exiled Christians. If that is the case, Helena's behaviour is not motivated by piety and philanthropy, as Eusebius implies, but is to be considered as the enforcement of the policy outlined by the emperor.

Helena's benevolent acts towards the poor and helpless are presented by Eusebius as the acts of a pious Christian who considers herself responsible for the well-being of the less fortunate. But the display of charity could very well have been a politically motivated act. One of the most attractive aspects of Christianity for the socially neglected—the poor, the sick, the widows and the orphans—was its charity. Especially from the end of the fourth century on, distributing charity to strangers and to the destitute or the near-destitute, became an important task of the Christian church. But in earlier periods also charity was an important aspect of Christianity. It was of particular importance when it came to making converts. In one of his letters Julian the Apostate maintains that it was the Christians' kindness towards strangers in particular which caused many to be converted. To compete with the Church, Julian advised pagan priests to set up taverns where strangers could stay. Moreover, pagan priests should annually reserve a certain amount of corn and wine to distribute among the poor, the strangers and the beggars.⁶⁴ In his *Misopogon* Julian makes the

⁶² VC III 44.

⁶³ VC II 31-32.

⁶⁴ *Epist.* 39 (430D).

same claim: the (Christian) women of Antioch induce the poor of their city to godlessness, i.e. Christianity, by giving them food.⁶⁵ Julian's statements are clear. By taking care of the poor, the sick and strangers, the Church gained converts for Christianity. What was Helena's motive in taking care of the weak? Was it just charity or was there an ulterior motive? Was her aim to make converts? It might well have been. Constantine also took care of the poor, the sick, the widows and the orphans. He did so with the preconceived purpose of making converts, as Eusebius asserts in *VC* III 58.⁶⁶ If Constantine did this, there is no reason to suppose Helena had other aims. Her gifts of money and clothing can be interpreted as a way of trying to make converts. Whether she succeeded in Christianizing the still largely pagan population of the eastern provinces, we do not know, but many of Constantine's subjects definitely began to feel sympathy for their emperor's religion.⁶⁷

The attention Helena paid to the churches also fits into her mission of Christianizing the East. She was not only concerned with supervising the building of the basilicas in Bethlehem and Jerusalem but also showed her concern for less magnificent churches. According to Eusebius, all churches received the benefit of Helena's generosity. She did not overlook any church, not even in the smallest towns.⁶⁸ She visited them all and prayed at their altars. For those who observed the Augusta's attention to the churches, it was plain that the Christian conviction of Constantine and his family was to be taken seriously. The imperial support for the new religion, expressed by Helena's lavish munificence, must have brought it home to many pagans that they could not expect much good from this Christian ruler. Many may have wanted to be on the safe side and adopted the religion of their emperor and his mother.

⁶⁵ *Misopogon* 363 A.

⁶⁶ See also *VC* I 43; IV 28.

⁶⁷ In the sixth-century itinerary of the Piacenza-pilgrim, the list of Helena's benevolent deeds is longer than that of Eusebius. According to the Piacenza-pilgrim (*Itinerarium Antonini Placentini* 27 = *CC ser. lat.* 175, 143), Helena also distributed bread among the poor and the strangers: *Item exeuntibus nobis ad portam maiorem venimus ad sanctum Isicius, qui ibidem in corpore iacet, ubi etiam et panes erogantur ad homines pauperes et peregrinos, quod deputavit Helena*. Possibly Helena's benevolence was confused with that of Helena of Adiabene (first century), who helped to suppress a famine in Judaea by buying corn from Egypt and distributing it among those in want (e.g. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 12).

⁶⁸ *VC* III 45.

Helena was not the only one sent to the East by Constantine to restore peace and to propagate Christianity. Constantine's mother-in-law Eutropia was also sent on a similar mission. She informed Constantine about the existence of a pagan altar, pagan cult statues and the performing of sacrifices at the Oak of Mamre in Palestine. God had appeared and spoken to Abraham on this spot.⁶⁹ Constantine immediately wrote to Macarius of Jerusalem and the other bishops of Palestine to inform them that he had instructed the *comes* Acacius to destroy the altar, burn the idols and purify the place. Having consulted the bishops of Palestine, Acacius was then to build a basilica at the place of God's appearance.⁷⁰ We do not know whether Helena and Eutropia travelled together, but from the Bordeaux-pilgrim we learn that already in 333 Mamre had a basilica "of wonderful beauty".⁷¹ The construction must have taken several years. This might suggest that Helena and Eutropia visited Palestine at about the same time.⁷²

A last aspect of Helena's journey deserves attention. Probably on her way back Helena visited Antioch. While staying in Antioch its bishop, Eusthatius, treated her disrespectfully.⁷³ The substance of the bishop's insult is not clear. It has been supposed that he did not give her proper attention or that he made insulting remarks about the empress' lowly origins.⁷⁴ Eusthatius' lack of interest may most probably be explained by his aversion to Arianism: Helena was sympathetic to this unorthodox current within Christianity.⁷⁵ The insult to Helena was one of the complaints brought forward against Eusthatius at the Council of

⁶⁹ Genesis 18:1-33.

⁷⁰ VC III 51-53; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* II 4,6. For the archaeological remains of the basilica, see E. Mader, 1957, vol. 1, 95-115.

⁷¹ *It. Burd.* 599.

⁷² Z. Rubin, 1982, 90, thinks Eutropia's journey took place between September 324 (Constantine's defeat of Licinius) and the spring of 325. In his *Vita Constantini*, however, Eusebius places the building of the basilica in Mamre chronologically after the Council of Nicaea and the construction of the churches in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. One of the arguments of Rubin for dating Eutropia's journey between September 324 and the spring of 325 is the fact that she is called Constantine's mother-in-law by Eusebius. After the downfall of her daughter Fausta, she would not have been addressed like this. However, it seems to me that especially after the execution of Fausta, she would have been presented as the emperor's mother-in-law to distract attention from the recent misfortunes in Constantine's house and to pretend that nothing had happened.

⁷³ Athanasius, *Hist. Arian.* 4; see also Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* II 31,11.

⁷⁴ H. Chadwick, 1948, 34.

⁷⁵ Philostorgius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 12; also E.D. Hunt, 1982, 35-36.

Antioch in 327.⁷⁶ The bishop was deposed as a result.

Meanwhile Helena had brought her mission of restoring peace and propagating Christianity to a close. Soon afterwards she died and exchanged her earthly life for “a heavenly life amidst a host of angels”.⁷⁷ As discussed above, this mission was wrongly presented by Eusebius as a pilgrimage. However, thanks to his interpretation, Helena’s journey became an example for later pilgrims.⁷⁸ Moreover, her sojourn in Palestine became the foundation for the development of the legends about Helena and the discovery of the True Cross.

⁷⁶ T.D. Barnes, 1978, 60. H. Chadwick, 1948, 31, thinks the council took place in 326 but this date is based on a wrong dating of Helena’s journey.

⁷⁷ VC III 46.

⁷⁸ Helena’s ‘pilgrimage’ and her charitable deeds very soon became a model for later pilgrims. E.D. Hunt, 1982, 49: “In making the transition from empress to pilgrim, Helena smoothed the way for her successors; the journeys of those who sought out the holy places became a natural element in a Christian Empire”. The next pilgrim of imperial blood was Eudocia, wife of Theodosius II; see E.D. Hunt, 1982, 221ff., and K.G. Holum, 1982, 184-188. The younger Melania imitated Helena’s concern for those condemned to the mines (Gerontius, *Vie de Sainte Mélanie*, SC 90, 140-143).

CHAPTER SIX

HELENA'S DEATH

Helena had reached the age of about eighty years when she died.¹ Much controversy surrounds the date of her death. According to R. Klein she died in 328 or 329. J. Vogt thinks she died in 329. A. Alföldi says her death must be dated to 330.² O. Seeck, in his article on Helena in the *RE*, maintains that she died between 335 and 22 May 337. R. Hanslik holds the view that she died in 337.³ A late date of death must be rejected. It is hardly conceivable that after Helena's travels so many years could have elapsed in which nothing is heard about her. As the woman who was sent by her son on an important mission and as the first imperial lady, she could hardly have escaped mention in the sources over so long a period.

The most obvious evidence for Helena's death is the abrupt interruption in the issue of Helena Augusta-coins in the spring of 329. This suggests that her death must be dated either to 328 or the beginning of 329. This date corresponds very well with Eusebius' remark (*VC* III 46) that Helena died shortly after her visit to the East.⁴

Eusebius also remarks that Helena died in the presence of her son Constantine.⁵ We know that in March/April of the year 328 Constantine left Nicomedia and slowly travelled to the western half of his empire. By late September he had arrived in Trier and conducted a campaign against the Germans during the autumn.⁶ If we assume that Helena died in the last months of 328 with Constantine at her side, then the western part of the empire, and perhaps even Trier, was the place of her death.

¹ *VC* III 46. She left her properties to her son and grandsons (*VC* III 46; Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 12). After their death all *principes Christiani* were thought to be received in the Heavenly Empire; see S.G. MacCormack, 1981, 148ff.

² *RAC* s.v. Helena II, 358; J. Vogt, 1976, 220; A. Alföldi, 1948, 104.

³ *RE* VII, 2822; *Kl. Pauly* 2, 988-989.

⁴ *RIC* VII, 72-73. According to J. Maurice, 1901, 183, Helena's journey lasted about one-and-a-half to two years: "Il faut donc placer son départ à la fin de 326, son voyage en 327 et 328, sa mort à la fin de 328 ou au début de 329." Cf. T.D. Barnes, 1982, 9, n.40, who thinks that the refoundation of Drepanum/Helenopolis on 7 January 327 marks Helena's death.

⁵ *VC* III 46.

⁶ T.D. Barnes, 1981, 221-222; 1982, 77-78.

As is clear from Eusebius' use of the term *βασιλεύουσα πόλις*, Helena was buried in Rome.⁷ Escorted by a grand military escort her corpse arrived at the eternal city to be placed in a royal tomb.⁸

Helena's mausoleum, later known as the 'Tor Pignattara' is situated on the Via Labicana, just outside the Aurelian wall. It was attached to the basilica of Ss. Marcellino e Pietro. In the second decade of the fourth century basilica and mausoleum were constructed by Constantine and were generously endowed by him with valuable gifts.⁹ The mausoleum was not originally intended for Helena. It has been suggested that Constantine had built it for himself before he decided to move the centre of his empire to the East by founding Constantinople.¹⁰

⁷ VC III 47. An early Greek *vita* of Constantine and Helena, perhaps dated to the fifth century, also informs us that she was buried in Rome in a porphyry sarcophagus; see F. Winkelmann, 1987, 635. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = PG 67, 121, unjustly thought that Eusebius meant Constantinople with this expression; see also P. Franchi de Cavalieri, 1953, 175-176. Most Byzantine writers adhered to Constantinople as the city where Helena was buried. According to Theophanes, *Chronographia* 27, 12-13, and Cedrenus, *Historiarum Compendium* I, 517, 12-15 (CSHB), her tomb is to be located in the church of the Holy Apostles—also the burial place of Constantine—in the eastern capital. In the Middle Ages, acc. to ASS Aug. III, 18 Aug., 600, her remains were supposed to have been transferred from Constantinople to Venice.

⁸ VC III 47.

⁹ *Lib. Pont.* I, 182: *Eisdem temporibus fecit Augustus Constantinus basilicam beatis martyribus Marcellino presbitero et Petro exorcistae in territorio inter duos lauros et mysileum ubi mater ipsius sepulta est Helena Augusta, Via Lavicana, miliario III. In quo loco et pro amore matris suae et veneratione sanctorum posuit dona voti sui:*

— *patenam auream purissimam, pens. lib. XXXV;*
— *candelabra argentea auroclusa in pedibus XII IIII, pens. sing. lib. CC;*
— *coronam auream quae est farus cantharus cum delfinos CXX, pens. lib. XXX;*
— *calices aureos III, pens. sing. lib. X, cum gemmis prasinis et yacintis;*
— *amas aureas II, pens. sing. lib. LX;*
— *altarem ex argento purissimo, pens. lib. CC, ante sepulchrum beatae Helenae Augustae, qui sepulchrum est ex metallo purphyriticus exculptus sigillis;*
— *fara canthara argentea XX, pens. sing. lib. XX.*

These treasures, given by Constantine, were placed in the mausoleum. For the valuables donated to the basilica Ss. Marcellino e Pietro see *Lib. Pont.* I, 183.

¹⁰ F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 64: "Lage und Grösse des Mausoleums sprechen dafür, dass es sich um einen kaiserlichen Bau, am ehesten um das Römische Mausoleum Konstantins des Grossen selbst handelt, das er sich vor der Gründung Konstantinopels noch in Rom gebaut hätte." R. Krautheimer, 1937-1970, II, 202, expresses his approval: "... we fully agree with Deichmann and Tschira's suggestion that the mausoleum was not built for Helena, but for Constantine himself ...". Deichmann en Tschira, 1957, 77, tried also, or rather contrived, to associate the building of the mausoleum with Helena. Constantine

Helena's mortal remains were buried in a porphyry sarcophagus.¹¹ As in the case of the mausoleum, this sarcophagus was also not originally designed for Helena, in spite of the fact that a relief portrait of Helena is attached to it.¹² It is very probable that the sarcophagus, because of the military character of its decorations, was originally meant to contain the corpse of Constantine.¹³

In the ninth century, part of Helena's remains, which had acquired great value as relics, were transferred to the diocese of Reims in France.¹⁴ During the reign of Pope Innocentius II (1130-1143) the bones which had remained behind were moved from the mausoleum¹⁵ on the Via Labicana to church of S. Maria in Aracoeli in the centre of Rome.¹⁶ Helena's sarcophagus was reused for the burial of Pope Anastasius IV (1153-1154). For this purpose the coffin was transported from Helena's mausoleum to the Lateran basilica.¹⁷ In those times it had become a kind of fashion

was so attached to his mother—an opinion found more often in modern literature on the subject—that he wanted to be buried with her in the same tomb: “Aber das Band um die Mutter war zeitleben so stark, dass die Voraussicht für eine gemeinsame Bestattung fast als selbstverständlich erscheint.” For Constantine's attachment to his mother Deichmann and Tschira refer to *VC* III 42-47. In these paragraphs Eusebius describes Constantine's respect for Helena and Helena's happiness in having a son like Constantine. However, Eusebius tells nothing of a special bond of love and affection between mother and son; neither do other sources. The idea of a joint mausoleum for Helena and Constantine must therefore be rejected.

¹¹ See note 9 above.

¹² This seems to have been the work of eighteenth century restorers. For the history of the sarcophagus, its reuse in the Middle Ages and its restoration, see A. Monaci, 1899; P. Franchi de Cavalieri, 1921; E. Sloequist, A. Westholm, s.a.

¹³ A. Alföldi, 1948, 104: “The Empress-mother Helena ... was buried in Rome in the porphyry sarcophagus which, by the military character of its reliefs, betrays that it was primarily intended for a man—in fact, for the son of Helena. Constantine, then, only left to the city of Rome the empty shell of his mother in the mausoleum which he originally had made for himself ...”. See also A. Demandt, 1989, 68. R. Krautheimer, 1937-1970, II, 202, professes the same; he even doubts whether the sarcophagus ever contained the remains of Helena. The sarcophagus is preserved in the Vatican Museum (G. Lippold, 1936, Nr.589, 195-205).

¹⁴ *Chronica Sigeberti* a.849 = *PL* 160, 162; see also F.W. Deichmann, A. Tschira, 1957, 80 and above p. 22.

¹⁵ Travel reports reveal that from the seventh century (see G.B. De Rossi, 1864-1877, I, 178-179) the mausoleum was considered and called a basilica. In the eighth and ninth centuries it was also referred to as the basilica of Helena: *Cimiterium itaque beatorum Petri et Marcellini via Lavicana iuxta basilicam beatae Elene renovavit* (*Lib. Pont.* I, 500); ... *basilica beate Helenae* ... (*Lib. Pont.* II, 50).

¹⁶ *ASS* Aug. III, 18 Aug., 606.

¹⁷ *Lib. Pont.* II, 388: *Tumulatus est autem Laterani in ipsa salvatoris ecclesia in porfiritico pretioso sepulchro. Johannes Diaconus, De Eccl. Rom. Lat.* = *PL* 195, 1553, asserts that Anastasius was buried in Helena's sarcophagus: *Ibi iacet Anastasius papa IV ... in mausoleo porphyretico praeclaro opere sculpto, in quo olim iacuit Helena mater*

for distinguished persons living in Rome to bury their relatives in ancient sarcophaguses.¹⁸ We do not know whether Anastasius had a special intention in wanting to be buried in the sarcophagus of Helena, who by this time was especially famous for her discovery of the True Cross.

Constantini imperatoris, quod videlicet mausoleum de ecclesia quam idem imperator ad honorem ipsius matris extra Urbem fabricaverat idem papa deportari fecerat.

¹⁸ R. Krautheimer, 1980, 212-213.

PART TWO

LEGEND

CHAPTER ONE

THE HELENA LEGEND

Three versions of the legend of the discovery of the Cross came into being between the end of the fourth century and the mid-fifth century: the Helena legend, the Protonike legend and the Judas Cyriacus legend. The Helena legend is definitely the oldest. From the time of its origin seven texts of the Helena legend were transmitted until c.450. They can be divided into two groups: a. the texts of the legend in the *Church Histories* of Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret; b. the texts of the legend by Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus. Of these seven texts, that of Rufinus¹ comes closest to the original version of the Helena legend:

At about the same time, Helena, the mother of Constantine, a woman of outstanding faith and deep piety, and also of exceptional munificence, whose offspring indeed one would expect to be such a man as Constantine, was advised by divinely-sent visions to go to Jerusalem. There she was to make an enquiry among the inhabitants to find out the place where the sacred body of Christ had hung on the Cross. This spot was difficult to find, because the persecutors of old had set up a statue of Venus over it, so that if any Christian wanted to worship Christ in that place, he seemed to be worshipping Venus. For this reason, the place was not much frequented and had all but been forgotten. But when, as we related above, the pious lady hastened to the spot pointed out to her by a heavenly sign, she tore down all that was profane and polluted there. Deep beneath the rubble she found three crosses lying in disorder. But the joy of finding this treasure was marred by the difficulty of distinguishing to whom each cross belonged. The board was there, it is true, on which Pilate had placed an inscription written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew characters.² But not even this provided sufficient evidence to identify the Lord's Cross. In such an ambiguous case uncertainty requires divine proof. It happened that in that same city, a certain prominent lady of that place lay mortally ill with a serious disease. Macarius was at that time bishop of the Church there. When he saw the doubts of the queen and all present, he said: "Bring all three crosses which have been found and God will now reveal to us which is the cross which bore Christ." Then, together with the queen and the others, he approached the sick woman, went down on his knees and poured out the following prayer: "Oh Lord, you

¹ Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 7-8.

² John 19:19.

saw fit through the Passion on the Cross of your Only-begotten Son to grant salvation to the human race, and now in our own time you have inspired your handmaid to search everywhere for the blessed wood on which our Saviour hung; now give us a clear sign which of these crosses was made to glorify our Lord and which were made to execute slaves. Let this woman, now lying ill unto death, be recalled to life from death's door as soon as the wood of salvation touches her." His prayer finished, he first brought one of the three crosses near, but nothing happened; then he brought the second near--still no reaction. But when he brought the third cross near, the woman suddenly opened her eyes and got up, all her strength restored. She ran through the house more quickly than when she had been well, and began to praise the power of the Lord. When the queen saw that her wish had been answered by such a clear sign, she built a marvellous church of royal magnificence over the place where she had discovered the Cross. The nails, too, which had attached the Lord's body to the Cross, she sent to her son. From some of these he had a horse's bridle made, for use in battle, while he used the others to add strength to a helmet, equally with a view to using it in battle. Part of the redeeming wood she sent to her son, but she also left part of it there preserved in silver chests. This part is commemorated by regular veneration to this very day. The venerable queen also left this further proof of her deep piety: she invited to dinner the virgins whom she found there consecrated to God. She is said to have looked after them with such great devotion, that she considered it a disgrace if they used the services of maidservants. Instead, having herself donned the garb of a maidservant, she served them food and drink with her own hands and poured water over their hands. She who was both queen of all the known world and the mother of the emperor appointed herself the servant of the servants of Christ. This, then, is the true story of what happened in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CROSS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

The legend of the discovery of the Cross probably came into being in the second half of the fourth century, but the True Cross had already been venerated for some time, especially in Jerusalem. It was also an object of veneration in other parts of the empire, and relics of the Cross had become widely distributed. In the first three centuries of the Christian era the Cross had been a symbol of minor importance.¹ From Constantine's reign onwards, the Cross became increasingly prominent as a symbol until it eventually became the Christian symbol par excellence. Initially an object identified with disgrace, it later became a highly revered token of salvation.² From the fourth century on, the sign of the Cross appeared nearly everywhere: engraved on coins, houses, sarcophagi and weapons, sewn on clothes, and even used as a tattoo.³ Reverence for the Cross as a symbol was undoubtedly greatly stimulated by the 'discovery' of what was considered to be the True Cross.⁴

The attribution to Helena of the discovery of the Cross is late and not based on historical evidence. The name of Helena does not occur in any of the fourth-century sources in which the True Cross is mentioned. It is useful to present a chronological inventory of these sources, since it not only demonstrates the dissemination of relics of the Cross, but also provides evidence that Helena was not initially connected with the Cross and its discovery. It also sheds light on the question of the date of discovery.

At the end of the 340s Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, mentions in his *Catecheses* the presence of the *lignum crucis* in the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. He alludes in three places to the relics of the Cross. It appears from these passages that Christians already attached great value to the Cross and that fragments of it had

¹ See e.g. M. Sulzberger, 1925; P. Stockmeier, 1966.

² Joh. Chrys., *Contra Jud. et Gent.* = PG 48, 826; *Exp. in Ps. 109*, 6 = PG 55, 274.

³ P. Stockmeier, 1966, 212-217. The first known representation of Christ's crucifixion only dates from the first half of the fifth century and was depicted on an ivory relief of Italian workmanship; see *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, s.v. Kreuz, 611-612.

⁴ P. Stockmeier, 1966, 201: "Die Auffindung des Kreuzes Christi löst eine starke kultische Bewegung aus; ..."

already spread over a wide area:

... and already the whole world is filled with fragments of the wood of the Cross.⁵

The holy wood of the Cross gives witness: it is here to be seen in this very day, and through those who take [pieces] from it in faith, it has from here already filled almost the whole world.⁶

... the wood of the Cross which from this place is spread piecemeal all over the world.⁷

Cyril's comments clearly show that already by the middle of the fourth century a great devotion to the Cross had developed in Jerusalem itself and in other parts of the empire. In his *Catecheses* Cyril does not inform us about the date of the discovery of the Cross. But some years later in 351, in a letter to Constantius II, the bishop informs the emperor of the appearance of a luminous Cross, which had been seen by the population of Jerusalem in the sky above Golgotha and which extended as far as the Mount of Olives.⁸ In this letter Cyril refers to the discovery of the Cross during the reign of Constantine:

For if in the days of your imperial father, Constantine of blessed memory, the saving wood of the Cross was found in Jerusalem (divine grace granting the finding of the long hidden holy places to one who nobly aspired to sanctity), now, sire, in the reign of your most godly majesty, as if to mark how far your zeal excels your forebear's piety, not from the earth but from the skies marvels appear: the trophy of victory over death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son of God, even the holy Cross, flashing and sparkling with brilliant light, has been seen at Jerusalem.⁹

In this letter Cyril gives a very positive picture of Constantius through a favourable comparison of his Christian reign and his piety with those of his father. Constantine was of course a very

⁵ Cyr. Jer., *Catechesis* IV 10 = PG 33, 470.

⁶ Cyr. Jer., *Catechesis* X 19 = PG 33, 685-687 (transl. S. Borgehammar, 1991, 90). The number of fragments from the True Cross was naturally limited. There were therefore probably many false relics in circulation. Paulinus of Nola, *Epist.* 31,6, ascribed living power to the Cross: "Indeed this Cross of inanimate wood has living power, and ever since its discovery it has lent its wood to the countless, almost daily, prayers of men. Yet it suffers no diminution; though daily divided, it seems to remain whole to those who lift it, and always entire to those who venerate it." (Transl. P.G. Walsh, *Ancient Christian Writers* 36, 132-133.)

⁷ Cyr. Jer., *Catechesis* XIII 4 = PG 33, 777.

⁸ PG 33, 1165-1176; see also Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.*, IV 5; E.D. Hunt, 1982, 155-156. J. Vogt, 1949, 596-604, dates the letter in 353.

⁹ PG 33, 1168-1169. Transl. Anthony A. Stephenson, *Fathers of the Church* 64, 232.

pious Christian but the son excels his father in zeal. Particularly significant for us here is Cyril's statement that the wood of the Cross was found in Jerusalem in the time of Constantine. This information does not correspond with the primary source on Constantine's reign, Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*. In describing the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, with which the Cross is connected, Eusebius makes no mention of the Cross and argues that the discovery of Christ's tomb provided Constantine with a motive for building the basilica. Many scholars have questioned this, and concluded that Eusebius presented a wrong picture. It was not the discovery of the tomb, but that of the Cross which should have motivated Constantine to build the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.¹⁰ Z. Rubin and H.A. Drake recently made a new and thorough study of Eusebius' account of the building of this church in Jerusalem and published some interesting discoveries.¹¹ The following analysis will draw freely on their arguments.

Eusebius' description of the building of the basilica in Jerusalem begins in *VC* III 25. It was probably at the request of the Christian community of Jerusalem that the church was built, on the site of the Resurrection, i.e. Christ's tomb.¹² Since Hadrian's time the tomb had been hidden beneath a temple of Aphrodite (*VC* III 26).¹³ Constantine ordered the demolition of temple and the removal of polluted soil, which formed an artificial platform upon which the temple was built. No sooner was this done than the tomb itself came into sight, the "testimony to the saving Resurrection".¹⁴ This inspired Constantine to build a church on this holy site. He wrote a letter to Macarius informing him that he wanted the church to be more beautiful than all other existing churches (*VC* III 30-32).¹⁵ Eusebius continues his account with a

¹⁰ E.g. Papebroch, *ASS* Mai I, 3 May, 366; L.-J. Tixeront, 1888, 163, n.1; E.M. Cios, 1898, 13-20. Others think Eusebius to be trustworthy: R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 72, n.1; E. Lucius, 1904, 167; A.-M. Rouillon, 1908, 135-136.

¹¹ Z. Rubin, 1982; H.A. Drake, 1985.

¹² *VC* III 25: τὸν ... τῆς σωτηρίου ἀναστάσεως μακαριστότατον τόπον. The request probably reached Constantine at the Council of Nicaea through Macarius, Jerusalem's bishop; see H.A. Drake, 1985, 135ff.

¹³ An indication that the temple indeed covered Christ's grave might be inferred from a remark of the second-century bishop Melito of Sardes who visited Jerusalem (*SC* 123, 114). See also H. Busse, G. Kretschmar, 1987, 62-63.

¹⁴ *VC* III 28: ... τῆς σωτηρίου ἀναστάσεως μαρτύριον.

¹⁵ Apart from competing with pagan sanctuaries, the basilica was evidently built as a 'successor' of the Jewish temple; see H. Busse, G. Kretschmar, 1987, 8, 81-111. Some of the liturgical rites performed in the basilica were modelled on those once in use in the Jewish temple; see J. Wilkinson, 1979. Even the date

detailed description of the basilica (*VC* III 33-40). It is striking that Eusebius only speaks about Christ's tomb and does not mention the Cross and Golgotha at all, whereas Cyril, some ten years after the *Vita Constantini* was composed, mentions that the Cross was venerated in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Moreover, the Bordeaux pilgrim, who visited Jerusalem in 333, explicitly mentions Golgotha as the site where Constantine built the basilica.¹⁶ The same pilgrim takes no interest whatsoever in the Anastasis, the monument built over Christ's tomb. His attention is focused on the Martyrium, i.e. the actual basilica. For the Bordeaux pilgrim the Constantinian buildings represented Golgotha.¹⁷ However, the traveller from Bordeaux also makes no reference to the Cross. But this is not surprising, considering that he took hardly any interest at all in relics and miracles.¹⁸

Eusebius' silence about Golgotha and the Cross becomes even more striking in view of the fact that Golgotha and the grave were situated so close together that they actually formed one site.¹⁹ Why does Eusebius only mention the tomb and remain silent about Golgotha, with the existence of which he was definitely acquainted, as appears from his *Onomastikon*?²⁰ Why is he silent about the Cross, which according to Cyril's letter to Constantius was found in Jerusalem during Constantine's reign? Does Eusebius deliberately conceal the discovery of the Cross, and if so, why? An answer may be provided by the letter Constantine wrote to Macarius, which Eusebius inserted in the *VC* between his descriptions of the excavations and of the completed Constantinian basilica. Eusebius explicitly connects the letter with the tomb, but when it is taken out of its context in the *VC*, it makes a very different impression. Whereas Eusebius refers to the discovery as a "testimony of the saving Resurrection" (*VC* III 28: τῆς σωτηρίου

of dedication of the basilica seems to have been timed purposely to coincide with the dedication date of Solomon's temple; see *It. Egeriae* 48,2; H.A. Drake *et al.*, 1980, 143-145.

¹⁶ *It. Burd.* 593,4-594,3. See also H.A. Drake, 1985, 6.

¹⁷ E.D. Hunt, 1982, 12: "Indeed to this visitor the site of the Constantinian buildings was Golgotha; it was this which first caught his attention."

¹⁸ H. Donner, 1979, 40: "Sein Interesse an Reliquien, Wundergeschichten, heiligen Priestern, Märtyrern, kurz an fast allem, was spätere Pilger so stark angezogen hat, ist ganz gering."

¹⁹ John 19:41-42: "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there." The Bordeaux pilgrim (*It. Burd.* 594,1) remarks that the crypt was only "a stone's throw" away from Golgotha.

²⁰ *Onomastikon* 74, r.19 (ed. Klostermann, Hildesheim 1966).

ἀναστάσεως μαρτύριον), Constantine in his letter to Macarius speaks of a “token of that holiest Passion” (*VC* III 30: γνῶρισμα τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου ἐκείνου πάθους), long hidden in the earth. The emperor instructed a basilica to be built on the site of this discovery. Constantine’s attention is completely focused on the basilica or Martyrium, which was built adjacent to the hill of Golgotha, whereas Eusebius is only interested in the Anastasis.²¹ Apparently, the emperor and the bishop are speaking about two different discoveries and therefore about two different monuments erected on the site. Clearly, Eusebius’ “testimony of the holiest Resurrection” cannot refer to anything but Christ’s tomb. But what does Constantine mean by his “token of that holiest Passion”? This expression definitely does not refer to the tomb. Therefore, τὸ γνῶρισμα πάθους most certainly refers to the Cross.²² It is striking that Eusebius uses similar expressions elsewhere. Thus at *VC* II 4,2 he speaks of τοῦ σωτηρίου πάθους σύμβολον, when referring to the Cross. It seems, therefore, that the reason for building the church in Jerusalem was in fact the discovery of the Cross and not the finding of the tomb, as Eusebius wants us to believe.

This impression is reinforced elsewhere in Eusebius’ writings. In 336 Constantine celebrated his thirtieth jubilee. For that occasion Eusebius travelled to Constantinople to deliver a panegyric in the presence of the emperor. In the ninth chapter of this so-called *Laus Constantini* (*LC*), Eusebius refers to the basilica in Jerusalem as “a temple sacred to the saving sign”.²³ According to Drake and Rubin this saving sign cannot be anything but the Cross.²⁴ Eusebius also uses other, similar phrases to describe the Cross: τρόπαιον τοῦ σωτηρίου (*VC* II 6,2; II 16,1), σημεῖον τοῦ σωτηρίου (*VC* III 2,2), τὸ σωτήριον σημεῖον (*VC* I 37,1), τὸ νικητικὸν τρόπαιον (*VC* I 37,1). Eusebius might have used the expression τὸ σωτήριον σημεῖον to refer to a symbolic Cross, as

²¹ H.A. Drake, 1985, 9-10: “Whereas the bishop’s attention is focused on the Anastasis, to which the Basilica is merely an appendage, Constantine’s own language is consistently suggestive of Calvary, and directly concerned only with the Basilica.”

²² See G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v. γνῶρισμα. Z. Rubin, 1982, 83: “It is not the evidence of the resurrection (the empty cave) that is herein mentioned; it is the sign of the holy passion, which is described as an object whose miraculous appearing is astounding. A contemporary reader would hardly have applied these terms to anything but the Cross.”

²³ *LC* 9,16: νεὼν ... ἁγίων τῷ σωτηρίῳ σημείῳ.

²⁴ H.A. Drake, 1985, 14; Z. Rubin, 1982, 83.

he does in other paragraphs of the *LC*²⁵, and not to a visible and tangible relic. But his audience in Constantinople must certainly have understood that the expression *τὸ σωτήριον σημεῖον* referred to the True Cross. Thus, when Eusebius speaks about the church in Jerusalem as “sacred to the saving sign”, it is most plausible—also considering that fact that as a symbol the Cross was very important to Constantine—that this basilica was not built because of the discovery of the tomb, but because of the discovery of the Cross. And it is this discovery of the Cross that Constantine refers to in his letter to Macarius.²⁶

There still remains the problem of Eusebius’ reference to the Cross in the *LC* and the basilica and his attempt to conceal the discovery of the Cross in the *VC*. In the latter, the symbol of the Cross and Constantine’s reverence for it are both prominent themes.²⁷ It seems reasonable to suppose that the finding of the True Cross should have been of the greatest importance, not only for Constantine but also for his biographer. But, as we have just shown, Eusebius has no interest at all in the actual Cross. Drake thinks that Eusebius does not mention the Cross as such, simply because, for him, the Cross only had symbolic value: it was purely a sign, albeit a sign of salvation and life and a trophy of victory.²⁸ Moreover, in Drake’s opinion, Eusebius had a compelling reason not to mention any association of the Cross with the place of Christ’s passion and Resurrection: if the holiest site in Christendom should become associated with the Cross, there existed a real danger that this most holy symbol of the faith would turn into an imperial standard.²⁹ In that way an ‘imperialized Christianity’ could develop, i.e. a Church dominated by the emperor. Therefore, Eusebius focused his attention on the less important tomb, even while he knew the discovery of the Cross was the immediate cause

²⁵ E.g. *LC* 9,17; 9,18. See also Z. Rubin, 1982, 83.

²⁶ H.A. Drake, 1985, 15: “... the clear identification of the Basilica with the Cross in the *LC* would lend weight to those who see at the emperor’s reference to a ‘token of the Passion’ in that letter [i.e. letter of Constantine to Macarius] as indicating something other than the tomb. This, in turn, would at least leave open the possibility that debris identified as remnants of the Cross might also have been discovered during the excitement of excavating for the tomb.” Z. Rubin, 1982, 83: “Yet the very admission that such phrases as the ‘salutary sign’ ... refer to the Cross, even in general terms, is important for the understanding of Constantine’s letter. It confirms our conclusion that this letter speaks about the discovery of the Cross and about a basilica to be built in honor of this sacred relic.”

²⁷ See for examples H.A. Drake, 1985, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

for the building of the Constantinian basilica in Jerusalem. This explanation of an 'imperialized Christianity' seems forced. There is little reason to suppose Christians at this time feared a state-dominated Christianity. On the contrary, they probably would have appreciated every involvement of the emperor with the Church as a form of protection of the faith.

Rubin presents another, more plausible motive for Eusebius' reticence about the discovery of the Cross.³⁰ He thinks Eusebius' silence can be explained in political terms. Eusebius did not mention the finding of the Cross because of the status it gave to Jerusalem and its bishop. In the 320s, the importance of Jerusalem as a Christian centre increased dramatically and consequently the influence of its bishop also increased. At the Council of Nicaea (325), it was decided that Jerusalem was so important because of its central role in Christian history, that it should enjoy a special place of honour at general councils after the bishoprics of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. However, at the provincial level the Bishop of Jerusalem remained subordinate to the Metropolitan Bishop of Caesarea.³¹ The latter presided over provincial synods and nominated and ordained the bishops in his province. This led inevitably to conflicts between the bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem. The latter strove for dominance in Palestine, while the Bishop of Caesarea tried to diminish the influence of the Bishop of Jerusalem at all costs.³² Caesarea eventually lost the struggle and in the fifth century the bishopric of Jerusalem became a patriarchate. After 325 Jerusalem's importance did in fact increase rapidly, whereas the influence of Caesarea waned. The emperor took a personal interest in the holy sites of Jerusalem; churches were built and it gradually became the centre of the Christian world. Caesarea simply could not boast a Christian history of the same importance as that of Jerusalem. It therefore seems more than likely that Eusebius as Metropolitan Bishop of Caesarea wanted to divert attention away from the status-bringing Cross to the less important tomb.

P.W.L. Walker recently presented an interesting theory in connection with Eusebius' silence. He suggests several reasons for

³⁰ Z. Rubin, 1982, 87-93.

³¹ J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova, et amplissima Collectio* II, 672. See also E. Honigsmann, 1950, 212, n.10; Z. Rubin, 1982, 90-91.

³² It is remarkable in this connection that Eusebius purposely avoids mentioning the name of the Bishop of Jerusalem. Z. Rubin, 1982, 88: "In *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius avoids mentioning Macarius in his own narrative, and allows that name to appear only in the intitulations of two of Constantine's letters that he cites."

his silence about the discovery of the Cross. Firstly, Eusebius might have had doubts about the authenticity of the discovered Cross. Secondly, Walker follows Rubin's argument that, as Metropolitan of Palestine, Eusebius was concerned about the growing aspirations of the Jerusalem church and about the way the Bishop of Jerusalem could use the discovery of the Cross to further his own ends. But the most compelling reason for Eusebius' reticence must have been his theological outlook. As a theologian he tended to emphasize the Resurrection more than Christ's death and he was therefore more interested in the tomb than in Golgotha and the Cross. Moreover, Eusebius emphasized the spiritual nature of Christianity; physical relics, like the Cross, could not rouse his enthusiasm and even filled him with aversion.³³ In Eusebius' opinion, reverence for a piece of wood would make Christianity dangerously primitive.

Another of Eusebius' remarks becomes perfectly clear when the building of the Jerusalem basilica is associated with the finding of the Cross. Although Eusebius tries to convince his readers that the Anastasis is the most important monument of the whole Constantian complex, he nevertheless calls the apse of the basilica *τὸ κεφάλαιον τοῦ παντός*,³⁴ clearly indicating that this site was to be considered as the centre of the complex. If the apse was indeed the chief part of the whole, a remark in the *Breviarius de Hierosolyma*, composed at the beginning of the sixth century, suddenly makes sense. The apse of the basilica, we are told, was supposed to have been built exactly on the spot where the Cross of Christ was found.³⁵

There are two other arguments which may confirm Cyril's statement that the Cross was found in Constantine's time. Firstly, according to Eusebius, the site of the tomb had been covered since Hadrian's time by a temple of Aphrodite.³⁶ However, in a letter to Paulinus of Nola, Jerome argues that on the site of Christ's grave once stood a *simulacrum* of Jupiter and on the site of the crucifixion (*in crucis rupe*) a statue of Venus.³⁷ Is it possible that since Hadrian's time Golgotha as well as the nearby tomb had

³³ P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 129; also 252ff.

³⁴ VC III 38.

³⁵ CC ser. lat. 175, 109. See also Theodosius, *De Situ Terrae Sanctae* 7 = CC ser. lat. 175, 118, and Z. Rubin, 1982, 83-84, Appendix IV.

³⁶ VC III 26.

³⁷ Jerome, *Epist.* 58,3: *Ab Adriani temporibus usque ad imperium Constantini per annos circiter centum octoginta in loco resurrectionis simulacrum Iovis, in crucis rupe statua ex marmore Veneris a gentilibus posita colebatur, aestimantibus persecutionis auctoribus quod tollerent nobis fidem resurrectionis et crucis, si loca sancta per idola polluisent.* Also Paulinus of Nola, *Epist.* 31,3. Jerome's letter is dated in 394-396.

been hidden beneath two pagan sanctuaries: one for Jupiter and one for Aphrodite?³⁸ In that case Eusebius, in his attempt to divert attention from Golgotha and the Cross, wrongly gave the impression that there existed only one pagan sanctuary, i.e. the temple of Venus, whereas in fact there were two sanctuaries. Eusebius probably left the *simulacrum Iovis* out of his account on purpose, because the mention of two pagan cult places would suggest a site with two different emphases, which Eusebius apparently wanted to avoid. Jerome, who spent a great part of his life in Palestine and knew the holy sites and their history very well, probably presents the correct picture, whereas Eusebius purposely presents a wrong view in order not to have to mention Golgotha.

Secondly, from the time of Egeria's *Itinerarium* (late fourth century), there is a well attested tradition that annually on 14 September the consecration of the Constantinian buildings in Jerusalem as well as the discovery of the Cross were commemorated. Egeria tells that, because the Cross was taken to have been discovered on the same day, the dedication of the church was celebrated on 14 September.³⁹ The connection established by Egeria between *inventio crucis* and the church lends weight to the possibility that it was the finding of the Cross which gave Constantine his motive for building the basilica.

Thus it may be concluded, that, although Eusebius is silent about the event, the Cross was indeed found during Constantine's reign in the 320s, just as Cyril alleges in his letter to Constantius. To commemorate this event, Constantine ordered a marvellous church to be built on the site of the discovery (Golgotha) and the adjacent site of Christ's tomb.

Cyril's remarks in his *Catecheses* about the wide distribution of relics of the Cross all over the world can also be substantiated. Two inscriptions prove the presence of fragments of the Cross in Mauretania (modern Algeria). The first one, dated to c.359, comes from ancient Tixter and is inscribed on a *mensa*. Apart from other relics like holy soil from Bethlehem, it also mentions a relic of the

³⁸ H. Busse, G. Kretschmar, 1987, 65, think there existed indeed two pagan sanctuaries: "Auf dem Forum befand sich ein Jupitertempel, ferner gab es ein Venusheiligtum in einer unterirdischen Höhle ..."

³⁹ *It. Egeriae* 48,1: ... *encenia cum summo honore celebrantur, quoniam crux Domini inventa est ipsa die*. See also E.D. Hunt, 1982, 39. At the beginning of the sixth century Theodosius, *De situ Terrae Sanctae* 31 = *CC ser. lat.* 175, 124, also alleges that there were special devotions in honour of the Cross which took place in September.

holy wood. The inscription is dedicated by the otherwise unknown Benenatus and Pequaria.⁴⁰ The second inscription is from ancient Matifou. It was set up by Flavius Nuvel, son of Saturninus, who in fulfilment of a vow, together with his wife Nonnica and all who belonged to his family, built a basilica and dedicated there a fragment of the True Cross brought from the Holy Land. The inscription probably dates from before 371.⁴¹

The great devotion to relics of the Cross also attracted the attention of Julian the Apostate (361-363), who must have considered it a thorn in his flesh. He complains that instead of worshipping a real god, Christians venerate the wood of the Cross, make the sign of the Cross and inscribe the *signum crucis* on the walls of their houses.⁴²

Relics of the Cross must have spread rapidly. They were not only preserved in churches but were also carried around by Christians on their persons. A nice example of this can be found in the *Vita Macrinae*, a eulogy composed c.379 by Gregory of Nyssa in honour of his recently deceased sister Macrina. Macrina was a *virgo Christi* and abbess of a convent in Annesys in northern Cappadocia. When Gregory learned that his sister was dying, he went to Annesys to support her in her last hours. After Macrina's death, her corpse was laid out in Gregory's presence by a certain Vetiana. Hidden under her clothes Vetiana discovered a necklace with a small iron crucifix and an iron ring. The latter contained a relic of the Cross:

Vetiana ... was arranging the holy head with her own hands when she put her hand on her neck and said looking at me: 'See the necklace the holy one wore.' And, at the same time, she unfastened the chain, stretched out her hand, and showed me an iron Cross and a ring of the same material. Both of these worn on a thin chain

⁴⁰ CIL VIII 20600 = ILCV I 2068: **a** Victorinus septimu idus Sept(e)m(b)r(es) Miggin <i>du<s> (Septembres) **b** memoria sacra **c** et dabula it de lignu crucis de ter(r)[a] promisonis, ube natus est Cristus apostoli Petri et Pauli, nomina marturu Datiani, Donatiani, Cipriani, Nemesani, [C]itini et Victo[r]ia[i]s ano proui(nciae) [t]recenti uiges(imo). posuit Benenatus et Pequaria. See also A. Frolov, 1961, 158-159; Y. Duval, 1982, vol. 1, 331-337.

⁴¹ CIL VIII 9255 = ILCV I 1822: d(e) sancto ligno crucis Christi saluatoris adlato adq. hic sito Flavius Nuvel praepositis egitum armicerorum <i>unior, filius Saturnini, viri perfectissimi, ex comitibus, et Col<e>cia<e>, honestissimae feminae, pr<on>epos Eluri Laconiq, basilicam uoto promissam adq. oblatam cum coniuge Nonnica ac suis omnibus dedicauit. See also A. Frolov, 1961, 159; Y. Duval, 1982, vol. 1, 351-353. Flavius Nuvel, who died before 371, was a *regulus per nationes Mauricas potentissimis* (Amm. Marc. 29,5,2). For Flavius Nuvel or Nubel, as Ammianus calls him, see J. Matthews, 1989, 371-373.

⁴² Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Julianum* 6 = PG 76, 796-797. See also A. Frolov, 1961, 159-160. Cyril's treatise dates from the years 379-395.

were always on her heart. And I said: 'Let us make this a common possession. You take the protection of the Cross, and the ring will be enough for me', for on the seal of the ring a Cross was carved. Gazing at it, the woman said to me: 'You have made a good choice, for the ring is hollowed out and in it is hidden a piece of the wood of life. And thus the seal of the Cross on the outside testifies by its form to what is inside.'⁴³

The iron crucifix, called a *phylaktèrion* by Gregory, served as a talisman, which possessed the power to ward off danger, demons and enemies. The ring containing the relic of the holy wood also served as a talisman. The carrying of these *phylaktèria* was not approved of by the clergy because they were too much like pagan and Jewish amulets. The *phylaktèria* were even officially forbidden by the Council of Laodicaea (latter half of the fourth century).⁴⁴

Relics of the Cross also served as jewelry, as John Chrysostom observed. In one of his sermons, held in Antioch in 387, he states that many tried to get their hands on a relic of the Cross and that women as well as men enclosed the splinter in gold and wore it around their neck as a piece of jewelry.⁴⁵

The *Itinerarium* of Egeria, mentioned above, is particularly informative where the veneration of the Cross is concerned. Like Macrina, Egeria was a *virgo Christi*. She came from the western part of the empire. In the years 381-384 she made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as well as to the monasteries and the holy men of the Egyptian and Syrian desert. The account of her pilgrimage, originally written for her fellow *virgines* who remained behind in their convent, not only provides important information about pilgrimages in Late Antiquity, but also, through Egeria's eyes presents an account of part of the liturgical year as it was celebrated in Jerusalem.⁴⁶ One of the great liturgical events of the year was Holy Week, which naturally came to a climax on Good Friday. On the morning of this day, the members of the Christian community of Jerusalem and the pilgrims present assembled at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Golgotha. Here, one by one, they were shown the True Cross by the bishop.

⁴³ *Vita Macrinae* 989M; transl. V. Woods Callahan, *The Fathers of the Church* 58, 184-185.

⁴⁴ F.J. Dölger, 1932, 84-85.

⁴⁵ Joh. Chrys., *Contra Iudaeos et Gentiles*, *Quod Christus sit Deus* 10 = PG 48, 826. A. Frolov, 1961, 160-161; F.J. Dölger, 1932, 104-105.

⁴⁶ For the date of her pilgrimage, see P. Devos, 1967, 177-178; E.D. Hunt, 1982, 124. For her region of origin and the circle of readers to whom the itinerary was addressed, see now H. Sivan, 1988a and 1988b.

The bishop's chair is placed on Golgotha ... and he takes his seat. A table is placed before him with a cloth on it, the deacons stand round, and there is brought to him a gold and silver box containing the holy Wood of the Cross. It is opened, and the Wood of the Cross and the Title are taken out and placed on the table. As long as the Holy Wood is on the table, the bishop sits with his hands resting on either end of it and holds it down, and the deacons round him keep watch over it. They guard it like this because what happens now is that all people, catechumens as well as faithful, come up one by one to the table. They stoop down over it, kiss the Wood, and move on. But on one occasion (I don't know when) one of them bit off a piece of the holy Wood and stole it away, and for this reason the deacons stand round and keep watch in case anyone dares to do the same again. Thus all people go past one by one. They stoop down, touch the holy Wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes, and then kiss it, but no one puts out his hand to touch it.⁴⁷

It is clear from this passage that only a small part of the Cross was preserved in Jerusalem. The rest of it (and more) was dispersed all over the world in the form of tiny fragments. Egeria is the first to mention the presence in Jerusalem of the *titulus*, bearing the text: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews', written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. According to the Gospel of John, this inscription had been attached to Jesus' Cross by Pontius Pilate.⁴⁸ The *titulus*, which might have been found together with the Cross, was probably also shown to the faithful to prove the authenticity of the holy wood.

The general eagerness to possess a relic of the Cross is amply illustrated by Egeria's remark that someone had once taken a bite from it. The sources indicate that a relic of the Cross was thought to offer protection against all sorts of evil. But the Cross could also inspire general religious enthusiasm, as is illustrated by Jerome in a letter to the *virgo Christi*, Eustochium. This letter, written in 404, is in fact a eulogy on the virtues of Eustochium's mother, Paula, who had recently died. Jerome describes, among other things, Paula's pilgrimage in 385-386. Naturally, on her journey through the Holy Land, she also visited Jerusalem and was shown the Cross. Kneeling before the Cross, she was overwhelmed by deep religious feelings, "as though she beheld the Lord hanging upon it".⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *It. Egeriae* 37,1-3. Transl. J. Wilkinson, 1981, 136-137.

⁴⁸ John 19:19-22.

⁴⁹ *Epist.* 108,9: ... *quasi pendentem Dominum cerneret* Jerome mentions the Cross several other times. In *Epist.* 47,2, written in 393 to his friend Desiderius, Jerome urges him come to Palestine to behold the testimonies of Christ's life and passion,

It may be concluded that in the fourth century a great veneration and cult of the Cross originated in Jerusalem and from there spread to other parts of the Roman Empire. This reverence was undoubtedly stimulated by the discovery in the 320s of a piece of wood which was considered to be the True Cross. In addition, it has been shown that the sources do not indicate any connection between Helena and the Cross, nor do they mention her involvement in the discovery of the holy wood. In fact, the sources are not at all preoccupied with the practical circumstances of the discovery of the Cross. This interest clearly developed at a later date, since narratives about the discovery of the Cross are only attested from the end of the fourth century. It is also precisely in this period that Helena begins to find fame as the discoverer of the Cross.

including the wood of the Cross. In his *Comm. in Ev. S. Matth.* IV = PL 26, 168, Jerome shows himself a great adversary of the use of relics of the Cross as *phylaktēria*; he calls women who carry these relics as talisman *superstitiosae mulierculae*. In his *Chronicon* a.321 = PL 27, 671-672, Jerome refers to the discovery of the Cross by Helena: *Helena Constantini mater, divinis monita visionibus, beatissimum Crucis signum, in quo mundis salus pependit, apud Jerosolymam reperit*. However, this passage is a later addition to the text, and therefore not authentic. In the GCS edition of the *Chronicon* (Eusebius' Werke VII, 230) the lines are correctly left out.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HELENA LEGEND

The first source which gives a full account of the discovery of the Cross by Helena is Ambrose's *De Obitu Theodosii*, composed in 395. Ambrose relates how Helena searched in Jerusalem for the Cross of Christ and how she found three crosses, that of Christ and those of the two thieves who were crucified at the same time. Helena, who expected the middle cross to be that of Christ but feared that the crosses might have changed places, eventually recognized the True Cross by way of the *titulus* attached to it by Pontius Pilate.¹ At about the same time a similar narrative is presented by John Chrysostom in his 85th homily on the Gospel according to John:

The wood of the cross would be lost to view, since no one undertook to preserve it, both because of the influence of fear and because the faithful were then busily engaged with other pressing matters. But at a later date it would be sought for, and it is likely that the three crosses would be lying together. Hence, provision was being made that the one belonging to the Lord might not go unrecognized: first, because of the fact that it was lying in the middle; and second, it was clearly evident to all because of the label, since the crosses of the thieves had no superscription.²

It is striking that Chrysostom, in contrast to Ambrose, obviously did not know that the Cross was found by Helena, otherwise he would definitely have mentioned her. Perhaps Chrysostom knew a rudimentary version of the legend which did not include Helena, while Ambrose was acquainted with a more elaborated one into which Helena had been inserted. This supposition brings us to the question of how the legend did in fact develop.

It is highly probable that Jerusalem was the place of origin of the story of the discovery of the Cross (see below ch. 6). Here, the Cross was found and displayed. Many pilgrims venerated the Cross here and if they had the chance, took relics of it back home. And it was here most probably that a narrative about its discovery originated and developed. At the time Ambrose and Chrysostom

¹ John 19:19-22.

² Joh. Chrys., *In Iohannem*, Hom. 85 = PG 59, 461. Transl. Th. A. Goggin, *The Fathers of the Church* 41, 430. The exact date of this homily is uncertain. A. Frolov, 1961, 157, thinks it should be dated to 398. M. van Esbroeck, 1979, 112, dates it roughly to the 390s.

reproduced their versions of the legend in a funeral oration and a homily, a fully developed written version of the legend already existed. The source for this version is the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Gelasius of Caesarea. This *Church History* has long been overlooked because it was not accessible. But now that it is, its significance for the origin and development of the legend of the discovery of the Cross is of great value.

Little is known about Gelasius of Caesarea. In 367 he was made Bishop of Caesarea (and Metropolitan) by his maternal uncle, Cyril of Jerusalem. However, the Arian party prevented him from taking up his see until after the death of the Emperor Valens in 378. He was one of the participants in the oecumenical councils which took place in Constantinople in 381 and again in 394.³ The date of his death is not certain, but it is assumed that he was dead already in 395.⁴ Of Gelasius' works, only fragments remain. His contemporaries considered Gelasius a brilliant writer who, however, barely exposed his work to publicity.⁵ He wrote several dogmatic treatises, of which only the titles or some fragments are preserved, and a *Church History* which was to continue from where Eusebius' *Church History* left off, although it seems to have begun with the reign of Constantius Chlorus. Although it was known in Byzantine times that Gelasius had written a *Church History*,⁶ no attention was paid to it and it was long thought to be lost. The loss was not regarded as great because a comment of Photius made it seem as if Gelasius had merely translated into Greek books X and XI of Rufinus' continuation of Eusebius' *Church History* which described the history of the fourth century.⁷ However, since the beginning of our century, German scholars in particular have convincingly argued that it was exactly the other way round: Rufinus' books X and XI were a Latin translation of Gelasius' Greek *Church History*.⁸ Especially since the publication of Friedhelm Winkelmann's *Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisereia*, where the whole problem is reconsidered and the earlier discussion summed up, this is considered an established fact. A precise date cannot be assigned to Gelasius' *Church History*, but he

³ J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova, et amplissima Collectio* III, 568, 851.

⁴ A. Glas, 1914, 1; F. Winkelmann, 1966a, 5, 71-72.

⁵ Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 140.

⁶ Photius, *Myriobiblon*, Cod. 89 = R. Henry, *Photius, Bibliothèque* II, Paris 1960, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ A. Glas, 1914; F. Scheidweiler, 1953, 1955; F. Winkelmann, 1966a; F. Winkelmann, 1966b.

had definitely finished the work by the time he died. Since Gelasius wrote this work at the request of Cyril of Jerusalem, who expressed this wish on his deathbed in 387, it can hardly be earlier than 390.⁹

Attempts have been made to reconstruct Gelasius' *Church History*. With the help of Socrates' *Church History*, the *Syntagma* of Gelasius of Cyzicus, the *Chronicle* of Georgios Monachos and several hagiographical *vitae*,¹⁰ it has been possible to retrieve parts of the text.¹¹ A verbatim reconstruction of Gelasius' *Church History* is not possible, but an outline of his text and the topics treated can be established. It is Winkelmann's merit to have retrieved 41 fragments that once belonged to Gelasius' work.¹² Fragment 1 is the important *praefatio* to the work. Not only does this reveal that Gelasius wrote the *Church History* at the behest of his uncle Cyril, but also that it was written as a continuation of and supplement to the *Church History* of Eusebius, his predecessor as Bishop of Caesarea. Just as later authors of *Church Histories*, Gelasius probably followed the method and form of Eusebius' *Church History*, which was considered exemplary.¹³ Gelasius begins his narrative in 302/303 with the persecutions during Diocletian's reign and he finishes with the reign of Valens (364-378). The central themes of the work are the theological conflicts, especially the controversy about Arianism, and the resulting struggle for power within the Church. Gelasius shows himself a convinced adherent of the Nicæan orthodoxy and an enemy of the Arians, of whom he himself had become a victim.¹⁴ Apart from his antagonism towards Arianism, Gelasius' *Church History* is characterized by its boundless admiration for Constantine the Great, as well as for Constantius Chlorus and Helena. Constantine is portrayed not merely as a good Christian emperor, but also as the most perfect Christian sovereign.¹⁵

As the principal sources for his work, Gelasius naturally used Eusebius' *Church History*, to which he added supplementary information. He also made use of Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*.¹⁶ The

⁹ F. Winkelmann, 1966b, 365, n.l.

¹⁰ *BHG* 185, 362, 364, 369, 1279, 1647.

¹¹ For this reconstruction see A. Glas, 1914, 18-78; F. Winkelmann, 1966a, 18-69.

¹² F. Winkelmann, 1966b, 348-356.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 356: "Man geht wohl in der Annahme nicht fehl, dass auch für ihn - wie für alle späteren Kirchenhistoriker- das Werk des Eusebios, seine Ziele und seine Methode, das grosse Vorbild waren ...".

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 365ff.

¹⁵ According to Winkelmann, 1966b, 358-359, Gelasius presented Constantine as even more perfect than Eusebius had done in his *Vita Constantini*.

¹⁶ F. Winkelmann, 1966b, 375, has demonstrated Gelasius' use of these sources

last edition of Eusebius' *Church History* appeared in 324¹⁷ and therefore the *VC* was possibly the only source available for the last thirteen years of Constantine's reign. Gelasius, as Bishop of Caesarea, would have had the *VC* close at hand. His predecessors Pamphilus and Eusebius had built up a great library in Caesarea and the *VC* undoubtedly belonged to its collection. Gelasius used his sources freely; long passages of Eusebius are often condensed by Gelasius.¹⁸

Gelasius is not averse to including legends and miracle stories in his work. One of these legends concerns the discovery of the Cross. As far as is known, he was the first to write down the narrative about the discovery of the sacred wood by Helena. In Winkelmann's reconstruction, fragment 20 deals with the legend of the Cross, which treated the following items: A healing miracle enables Helena and Macarius to identify the discovered cross of Christ; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built; the nails are discovered by Helena and they are incorporated in Constantine's helmet and included in the bridle of his horse; Helena serves virgins at a banquet; death of Helena.¹⁹ Gelasius' description of miracles, showing God's strength and power, served to propagate Christianity.²⁰ The legends and miracle stories Gelasius included in his work most probably go back to oral sources.²¹ It probably follows that the legend about the discovery of the Cross also initially circulated orally before Gelasius wrote it down. In view of the fact that legends tend to grow by the insertion of new narrative elements, especially miracle stories, it is obvious that Gelasius' version is already fully developed and is definitely not a legend *in statu nascendi*. Unfortunately, the lack of sources prevents a full elucidation of the process of its development.²²

by a convincing example. In imitation of Eusebius, Gelasius alleges that Constantine only fought one war against Licinius, whereas in fact they were involved twice (in 317/317 and 324) in an armed struggle. Already earlier F. Winkelmann, 1962, 89-90, had suspected that the *VC* was an important source for Gelasius.

¹⁷ T.D. Barnes, 1980.

¹⁸ F. Winkelmann, 1966b, 378ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁰ The miracle of the healing of the mortally sick woman in the legend of the Cross also served this purpose; see *ibid.*, 361.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 375-376: "Auf mündlicher Überlieferung wird auch manches andere - Legenden, Wundergeschichten und Berichte über theologische Auseinandersetzungen- beruhen. Gelasios war Metropolit von Palästina und hatte dadurch einen grossen Informationsradius."

²² S. Heid, 1989, 61-64, thinks that the legend already existed in writing by c.350, long before Gelasius wrote it down. Heid connects the origin of the legend

Winkelman's reconstruction of Gelasius' text is of great importance with regard to the legend of the Cross. Ambrose's version in his *De Obitu Theodosii* used to be considered the oldest narrative account of the discovery of the Cross, but Gelasius' newly-discovered version of the legend is presumably, if not certainly, the oldest. Therefore, the theory that the legend is of Latin origin is no longer tenable.²³ The legend most probably originated in Jerusalem. Gelasius, as a relative of the Bishop of Jerusalem and Metropolitan of Palestine, was undoubtedly familiar with the historical traditions current in Jerusalem. Therefore it seems only natural that Gelasius' account of the finding of the Cross by Helena is a reflection of the version in circulation in the city where the event had taken place.

Gelasius was the source for all fifth-century authors who included the story of the discovery of the Cross in their *Church Histories*. Directly or indirectly, Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret and Gelasius of Cyzicus derive their accounts of the *inventio crucis* from Gelasius of Caesarea. The accounts Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus do not stem directly from Gelasius and will therefore be treated separately.

The accounts of the discovery of the Cross given by Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret show many similarities.²⁴ Chronologically, all four situate the discovery shortly after the Council of Nicaea, although information to establish an exact date is not given. But the general opinion seems to have been that the discovery took place after this ecclesiastical meeting.²⁵

with the so-called *Encaenia*, the annual festivities to celebrate the dedication of the Church at Golgotha, at which occasion the discovery of the Cross was also celebrated (*It. Eger.* 48,2). In his opinion, the fully developed legend was the prerequisite for the origin of the celebration of the Cross at this religious festival. Heid even presumes that the legend was one of the liturgical texts read at the *Encaenia*. The legend would have been composed by the clergy of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and it would have been this text that Gelasius included in his *Church History*. This theory does not seem to me to be convincing.

²³ F. Winkelman, 1966b, 380-381: "Bei Gelasios (Fragm. 20) findet man die früheste schriftliche Fixierung dieser Geschichte. Sie ist hier schon farbiger und weit inhaltsreicher als die etwa gleichzeitige Darstellung im lateinischen Sprachbereich durch Ambrosius, die dann auch bei den Lateinern durch die bei Rufinus (X 7f.) erhaltenen Übersetzung des Gelasianischen Berichtes verdrängt wurde." Cf. M. Pardyova-Vodova, 1980, and H. Busse, G. Kretschmar, 1987, 60, who incorrectly maintain that the legend was of Latin origin.

²⁴ The account of Gelasius of Cyzicus is omitted in the following comparison because his version is very similar to that of Theodoret.

²⁵ Socrates inserted some letters of Constantine, including the letter to Macarius (VC III 30-32) between his description of the deliberations at the Nicaean

Rufinus wrote his *Church History* around 402.²⁶ Rufinus, born in c.345 in Aquileia, left his homeland in the 370s for the eastern part of the empire. After travelling through Egypt, where he visited holy men and monasteries, and spending some time in Alexandria, he settled in Jerusalem. Together with Melania the Elder, a *virgo Christi* of senatorial descent, he founded a combined monastery and convent on the Mount of Olives. Rufinus collaborated with Melania in presiding over this monastery until he returned to Italy in 397. This monastery became a centre of Christian learning where the Scriptures were studied and manuscripts copied by the monks.²⁷ Rufinus himself was mainly occupied with translating Greek theological works into Latin. He made a translation of Origenes' *Peri Archon* which became famous for the profound theological controversy it caused between himself and Jerome. After his return to the Latin-speaking world, Rufinus continued his translation work. His *Church History* is a Latin translation of two Greek originals. The first nine books are a translation of Eusebius' *Church History* while Books X and XI are, as mentioned above, derived from Gelasius of Caesarea. A. Glas considers Rufinus to have been an unimaginative translator of the works of Eusebius and Gelasius.²⁸ Winkelmann is more lenient in his judgment but in his opinion also there is no doubt that Rufinus had for the most part translated the work of his predecessors without adding much that was new.²⁹

Council and the discovery of the Cross. Theodoret also included Constantine's letter to Macarius.

²⁶ A. Glas, 1914, 10-13. F. Winkelmann, 1966a, 71. This date is based on Rufinus' statement in the preface of his *Church History* that he wrote this work *tempore quo disruptis Italiae claustris Alarico duce Gothorum se pestifer morbus infudit et agros armenta viros longe lateque vastavit* (GCS, Eusebius Werke II-2, 951). Alaric invaded Italy twice, in 401/402 and in 408. Rufinus began writing his *Church History* at the request of Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia. Since the latter died in 407, Rufinus must have composed his *Church History* during Alaric's first invasion.

²⁷ Rufinus, *Apol.* II 8 = *PL* 21, 591ff.

²⁸ A. Glas, 1914, 32: "Die ... Annahme, dass Rufins Werk nicht Original, sondern nur Übersetzung ist, wird durch eine durchgehende Vergleichung der noch vorhandenen Reste des griechischen Textes nirgends widerlegt, sondern vielfach noch bestätigt." *Ibid.*, 79: "Es kann daher kaum mehr einem Zweifel unterliegen, dass auch die letzten zwei Bücher der Kirchengeschichte aus der Reihe der selbständigen Bücher Rufins zu streichen sind, da für den weitaus grössten Teil derselben die Kirchengeschichte des Gelasios von Kaisareia als Vorlage benutzt ist."

²⁹ F. Winkelmann, 1966a, 73: "Den Ergebnissen ... entsprechend müsste angenommen werden, dass Rufinus also den grössten Teil seiner Bücher X und XI aus dem Werk des Gelasios von Kaisareia mit einigen Änderungen und Einschüben übernahm."

It is Rufinus's Books X and XI which interest us here. In his foreword to these books Rufinus alleges that, apart from his own memory, he used written sources for this part of his *Church History*.³⁰ Unfortunately, he does not reveal his sources nor does he inform his readers to what extent he made use of them. In Books X and XI there are some original passages, but the rest is considered to be mainly a translation of Gelasius. This applies especially to Book X, 1-15 (the legend of the discovery of the Cross is related in Book X, 7-8) which is in fact a translation from Gelasius' history.³¹

Rufinus' account of the discovery of the Cross can be reduced to four main themes which may each be subdivided into minor motifs.

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Divine visions inspire Helena to go to Jerusalem.
2. She asks the inhabitants of the city where Jesus was crucified.
3. The location of the crucifixion is hard to find; knowledge about it has almost disappeared as a result of its obliteration by means of a statue of Venus.
4. A heavenly sign points out the place.
5. Helena orders the pagan sanctuary to be demolished and the ground excavated.
6. She discovers three similar crosses; because the *titulus* has been separated from Christ's Cross, she is unable to identify the True Cross and has to wait for a divine sign.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. In Jerusalem there is a noble woman lying mortally ill.
2. Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, offers his help.
3. Macarius brings the three crosses to the dying woman, kneels at her bed, and prays to God to reveal the True Cross.
4. The text of Macarius' prayer.
5. After his prayer, Macarius brings two crosses to the woman, with no result. However, contact with the third cross, the True Cross, instantly heals the woman.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

³⁰ GCS, Eusebius Werke II-2, 957: ... *quae vel maiorum litteris repperimus vel nostra memoria attigit.*

³¹ F. Winkelmann, 1966a, 76. *Ibid.*, 104: "Es gibt daher nur den einen Schluss ... dass Rufinus in Buch X das Werk des Gelasios teils durch wörtliche Übersetzung, teils durch inhaltliche Anklänge und freie Verarbeitung, teils durch Veränderung, Kürzung oder Erweiterung verwertete. Das können wir bis einschliesslich Rufinus X 15 verfolgen; ..."

1. After Christ's Cross is recognized, Helena builds a church at the place of its discovery.
2. She sends the nails used in the crucifixion to Constantine, to be incorporated in the emperor's helmet and to be included as part of the bridle of his horse.
3. Helena also sends her son a fragment of the Cross; she has a silver shrine made to hold the part which is to remain in Jerusalem.

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress).

1. Helena invites holy virgins to a banquet and serves them herself, presenting herself as a servant of the servants of God.

This narrative structure which goes back to the legend as related by Gelasius of Caesarea, is adopted by all fifth-century church historians. Although the structure remains the same, separate themes can alter or even be left out, and new themes can be inserted, as a closer examination of the other texts makes clear.

Socrates' *Church History* is the first transmitted account in Greek which relates the legend of Helena's discovery of the Cross.³² Unlike Rufinus, Socrates was not a clergyman but a *scholasticus* from Constantinople. His *Church History*, consisting of seven books, is a continuation of that of Eusebius and deals with the period 305-439. It was written in the years 338-443.³³ Socrates used as sources not only ecclesiastical documents but also secular works,³⁴ as well as his own, now lost, *Chronicle of Constantinople*. He also drew on oral information and his own memory. Socrates' account of the discovery of the Cross is similar to that of Rufinus, though sometimes he changes the order of events. In general, Socrates treats the subject more circumstantially and adds information which has not much to do with the actual discovery. For example, at the beginning of his narrative he relates that Drepanum was renamed Helenopolis after Helena.³⁵ Comparison with Rufinus' version of the legend serves to highlight some striking differences in Socrates' version: Helena in her search for the Cross considers Christ's tomb, and not the place of crucifixion, as the place where

³² *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = PG 67, 117-121.

³³ G.F. Chesnut, 1986, 175.

³⁴ One of these works was the *Christianikè Historia* of Philippus of Side. This universal history, most of which is now lost, treated the history of the world from Creation until 430 A.D. Socrates obviously knew this work (*Hist. Eccl.* VII 27); see also R.A. Markus, 1975, 9. It is not known whether Philippus included the legend about the discovery of the Cross.

³⁵ *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = PG 67, 117.

the Cross was hidden.³⁶ Moreover, he adds a new element to the legend which is not to be found in any other text. According to Socrates, the fragment of the Cross which Helena had sent to Constantine was concealed by the emperor in a bronze statue of himself in Constantinople in order to protect the city. Socrates got the information for this remarkable statement from the inhabitants of Constantinople.³⁷ The other themes mentioned by Socrates are the following:

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Helena is encouraged by dreams to go to Jerusalem.
2. She searches for Christ's tomb.
3. A sign from God shows her the location of the tomb which was hard to find because it was covered by a temple and statue of Aphrodite.
4. Helena orders the temple and statue to be torn down and the ground dug up.
5. Inside the tomb she finds three crosses and near the crosses Pilate's *titulus*, but she is sad because she has doubts about which one is the True Cross.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. Macarius puts an end to Helena's sadness and doubts by asking for a sign from God.
2. He brings the crosses into contact with a dying woman, a native of Jerusalem.
3. After the touch of the first two crosses nothing happens, but at the touch of the third cross the woman is instantly cured. In this way the True Cross is identified.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

1. Helena has a church built on the site of the tomb and names it 'New Jerusalem'.
2. She leaves part of the Cross in Jerusalem in a silver casket.
3. Helena sends another part of the Cross to Constantine in Constantinople; he conceals it in his bronze statue.
4. Helena also sends Constantine the nails, which he has incorporated in his helmet and included in the bridle of his war-horse.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = PG 67, 120. Remains of the porphyry pillar on which the statue was placed can still be seen; see R. Krautheimer, 1983, 55-56.

5. The emperor provides all the materials necessary for the building of churches and in a letter he requests Macarius to make haste with the construction.

6. Helena builds a church on the site of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and also one on the Mount of Olives.

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress).

1. Helena invites holy virgins to a banquet, prays with them and serves them at table.

2. She endows churches and gives gifts to the poor.

3. After a life of piety, Helena dies at the age of c.80 and is buried in *Nea Roma* (= Constantinople).

4. Drepanum is named Helenopolis after Helena, as Socrates relates at the beginning of his account.

The longest Greek version of the legend is found in Sozomen's *Church History*.³⁸ Like Socrates, Sozomen was a *scholasticus* in Constantinople. His *Church History*, written in the 440s, treats the period 324-439 and consists of nine books. The history was probably left unfinished at Sozomen's death in c.450. Sozomen's history is partially based upon Socrates' *Church History*. As far as the legend of the Cross is concerned, Sozomen uses the same sources as Socrates (Rufinus and the *VC* for example), but handles them in an independent way.³⁹ He also draws on some new sources. The contents and structure of Sozomen's version of the legend are in the main similar to those of Socrates. Remarkable, however, is the important role Sozomen assigns to Constantine in the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Unlike the version of Gelasius/Rufinus and Socrates, it is not Helena but Constantine who orders the building of the church on Golgotha. Sozomen adds more new elements to the legend than Socrates. These elements were not the product of his own imagination but had become known to him via oral and written information, as he alleges in a justification of his sources.⁴⁰ Sozomen includes in his version four elements of particular importance, which demonstrate his use of a range of sources not used by his fellow church historians. First, he explicitly mentions that Helena became

³⁸ *Hist. Eccl.* II 1-2.

³⁹ G.F. Chesnut, 1986, 205: "... Sozomen did go back and independently make use of the sources from which Socrates had derived his information. Sozomen took an independent look at Rufinus's *Church History*, drew on parts of Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* that Socrates had used ...". See for Sozomen's sources also G. Downey, 1965, 64-65.

⁴⁰ *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,11.

acquainted with the hiding-place of the Cross by way of divine signs and dreams and not because a Jew, who must have gained his knowledge about the site from an ancestral document, had shown her the place.⁴¹ This remark undoubtedly refers to the Judas Cyriacus version of the legend, which tells that the Jew Judas showed Helena the place where the Cross lay buried (see below ch. 8). Sozomen must have known this alternative reading of the legend from his written or oral sources, but obviously did not give much credence to it. Secondly, after Sozomen has described the 'resurrection' of the mortally sick woman, he adds that there is also a story that a dead person had come to life again in the same way, i.e. by the touch of the True Cross.⁴² This element is also found in Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus, who relate that the Cross was identified by the revival of a dead man.⁴³ This is probably a small variation in the legend. Sozomen's reference to Zechariah's prophecy of the Christian reign constitutes a third new element, which he introduces when he states that the nails were used for making a helmet for the emperor and a bit for his horse.⁴⁴ Sozomen is in fact the first Greek source containing this reference. The only Latin source which refers to Zechariah's prophecy is Ambrose's *De Obitu Theodosii*.⁴⁵ Sozomen may have possibly been familiar with the funeral oration of the Bishop of Milan and may have derived the reference to Zechariah from it. The last element added by Sozomen is that of the Sibylline prophecy.⁴⁶ The Sibyl was supposed to have prophesied the discovery of the Cross and its veneration, a prediction even acknowledged by pagans.⁴⁷ Besides these important additions, Sozomen differs on some minor points from his predecessors. But generally he follows the format of Gelasius/Rufinus and his version does not deviate much from those of his fellow church historians.

⁴¹ *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,4.

⁴² *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,8.

⁴³ *Epist.* 31,5; *Chron.* II 34.

⁴⁴ *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,9. Zech. 14:20.

⁴⁵ *De Ob. Theod.* 40.

⁴⁶ *Orac. Sibyll.* VI 26.

⁴⁷ *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,10. By mentioning the Sibylline prophecy, Sozomen attempts, by situating the predictions about the coming of Christ and the rise of Christianity in the pagan past, to legitimize Christianity. Apart from Virgil's fourth *Ecloga*, the *Oracula Sibyllina* were considered suitable for this purpose. Constantine himself often referred to the Sibylline prophecies in his *Oratio ad Sanctum Coetum*. This oration, probably delivered in April 325 in Antioch, was appended to the *Vita Constantini* as a 'fifth book'; see R. Lane Fox, 1986, 627ff, 647ff. Presumably Sozomen derived his reference to the Sibylline prophecy from Constantine's oration.

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Helena comes to Jerusalem to pray and visit the holy places.
2. She searches for the Cross, which is, like the tomb, hard to find.
3. Enemies of Christianity have covered the place with a heap of sand, have surrounded Golgotha and the tomb with a wall and have set up a temple and statue for Aphrodite.
4. The place comes to light, not under the direction of a Jew, but by means of divine signs and dreams.
5. Constantine orders the sand to be removed; the tomb is revealed and 'on the other side of the same place' three crosses and the *titulus* appear.
6. The True Cross cannot be identified because the *titulus* has become separated from it. Moreover, the crosses are jumbled together because the Roman soldiers, who had taken Jesus and the thieves down from their crosses, have thrown the crosses away.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. A noble woman, native of Jerusalem, lies dying.
2. Macarius and Helena are standing at her deathbed and Macarius prays for a sign from God.
3. After the touch of two of the crosses is of no avail, the third cross instantly cures the woman.
4. A dead person has also come back to life at the touch of the Cross.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

1. A large part of the Cross is preserved in Jerusalem in a silver casket.
2. Another part is sent by Helena to Constantine together with the nails; the latter are incorporated in the emperor's helmet and are included as part of the bridle of his horse.
3. Reference to Zechariah 14:20 and the prophecy of the Sibyl.
4. Constantine orders a church of great beauty to be built on the site of the discovery.
5. Helena builds churches in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives.

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress).

1. Helena invites holy virgins to a banquet and serves them at table.
2. She presents the churches in the cities of the East with suitable

gifts, helps the poor and those who have lost their property, and releases others from captivity, exile and the mines.

3. She is given the title Augusta and coins with her portrait are minted; the imperial treasury is put at her disposal.

4. She dies at the age of c.80, but she is not forgotten because towns in Bithynia and Palestine are named after her.⁴⁸

Theodoret (393-c.466) is the third Greek author who included the legend of the discovery of the Cross in his *Church History*.⁴⁹ Theodoret was bishop of Cyrrhus in Syria after 423. He had an excellent reputation as an author. Apart from his *Church History*, he wrote several other works like letters and biographies of Syrian ascetics. His *Church History* covers the period from the beginning of Constantine's reign until 428. It was composed in the 440s.⁵⁰ Theodoret's version of the legend is essentially the same as that of Gelasius/Rufinus, Socrates and Sozomen, though it is more condensed than that of his predecessors and some elements are left out or put in another order. The main difference is Helena's motive for travelling to Jerusalem. While his fellow church historians give as reason her eagerness to search for the Cross, Theodoret alleges she came to Jerusalem to deliver Constantine's letter to Macarius. This assertion is clearly derived from Eusebius' *VC* (III 30-32). Theodoret's omission of Helena's search for the site of the crucifixion or tomb is remarkable. Another striking feature is the prominence he gives to Helena. In Theodoret's version, Helena is Constantine's superior: she raised him as a Christian and on her deathbed she instructs her son how to rule his empire in a God-fearing way.

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Helena, who has raised Constantine as a Christian, goes to Jerusalem to deliver her son's letter to Macarius; she is already nearing the end of her life and is about 80 years of age.

⁴⁸ In comparison with his predecessors, Sozomen provides much more additional information about Helena and her other activities in the East. This information is a faithful reproduction of Eusebius' *VC* III 44-45. It seems therefore plausible to assume Sozomen used the paragraphs in the *VC* about Helena as a source for this part of his *Church History*.

⁴⁹ *Hist. Eccl.* I 18.

⁵⁰ G.F. Chesnut, 1986, 208-209. L. Parmentier, *Theodoretus, Historia Ecclesiastica*, CI (ed. GCS), believes Theodoret began his *Church History* in 449. In this year he was deposed by the Council of Ephesus as bishop because of his Nestorian sympathies. After his conviction, he returned to the orthodox creed and was rehabilitated by the Council of Chalcedon (451). He probably wrote his *Church History* during the period he was out of office.

2. At the place of Christ's suffering, she orders the godless temple to be demolished and the ground dug up.
3. The tomb is discovered and three crosses are found nearby.
4. It is not known which one is the cross upon which Christ had died.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. Macarius identifies the True Cross by bringing each of the three crosses into physical contact with a noble woman struck by a mortal illness; while doing this Macarius prays fervently.
2. When touched by the Cross of the Saviour, the woman immediately becomes well again.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

1. Having discovered what she had longed for, Helena incorporates several nails in Constantine's helmet and several others in the bridle of his horse.
2. In doing this she wants both to protect her son and to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah.
3. She sends part of the Cross to the imperial house; she has a silver casket made for the preservation of the other part which she gives to the bishop of Jerusalem.
4. Helena assembles a group of craftsmen and builds churches of great beauty and great size, which do not have to be described since all who love God hurry to admire them.

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress).

1. Helena invites virgins to a banquet and serves them herself at table.
2. Having done all this and more, she returns to her son and soon dies, after giving Constantine instructions for a God-fearing government.
3. She continues to be honoured after her death.

A comparison of the different versions of the legend as recorded by the church historians shows that they all keep to the structure and contents of the story as first written down by Gelasius of Caesarea. New elements from written and oral sources may be included or other elements may be left out, but these alterations do not change the purport of the legend.

Apart from its inclusion in *Church Histories*, the legend of Helena was also related by Ambrose in his funeral oration for Theodosius the Great, by Paulinus of Nola in one of his letters, and by

Sulpicius Severus in his *Chronicle*. For the church historians the story of the discovery of the Cross was a historical event worth including in their *Church Histories*. The same goes for Sulpicius Severus. But for Ambrose and Paulinus of Nola the finding of the Cross was also something more, an incident with a more profound meaning. For Ambrose the discovery of the Cross marked the beginning of a hereditary, imperial rule based firmly on orthodox Christianity. In relating the legend to his friend Sulpicius, who was unfamiliar with it, Paulinus gave it an educational function. By making Sulpicius familiar with the story and thus with the power of the Cross, Paulinus attempted to give his friend's faith a deeper meaning.

The funeral oration for Theodosius, delivered by Ambrose on 25 February 395, is considered to be our oldest received source for the discovery of the Cross.⁵¹ The legend as told by the Bishop of Milan deviates considerably from the versions given by the church historians, and by Paulinus and Sulpicius.

It has long been a matter of debate whether the legend was originally part of the funeral oration. In 1921 M.L. Laurand argued that the spoken oration had originally concluded with chapter 40, and that all following chapters were included when the oration was officially published.⁵² Ch. Favez also argued that the chapters on the legend of the Cross were added when the oration was published.⁵³ The function of this addition, according to Favez, was to point out the Christian tradition of the imperial reign to Theodosius' successors, his sons Arcadius and Honorius, and to draw their attention to their duty to protect and continue this tradition. After all, since Constantine Christianity had been the faith of the emperors and it was Christianity which, by means of the Cross and the nails incorporated in the emperor's helmet and the bit of his horse, had guarded the emperors and the empire.⁵⁴ In 1978 W. Steidle convincingly demonstrated on grounds of internal consistency that the legend formed a very essential and original part of the *De Obitu Theodosii* and could therefore not have been added to it later.⁵⁵ The central theme of

⁵¹ *De Ob. Theod.* 40-49.

⁵² M.L. Laurand, 1921.

⁵³ Ch. Favez, 1932, 424: "... que le passage concernant Hélène ne faisait pas partie du discours prononcé et qu'Ambroise l'y a lui-même ajouté lors de la publication."

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 425-428.

⁵⁵ W. Steidle, 1978, 112: "Abschliessend darf man jetzt wohl mit einiger Zuversicht behaupten, dass die Rede de obitu Theodosii samt der in so vielfältiger

the oration was the *hereditas fidei* and according to Steidle the story of the finding of the Cross fitted very well into this theme. Ambrose emphasizes that Constantine had supported, propagated and protected Christianity and that he had left the Christian faith as an inheritance to his successors,⁵⁶ who are supposed to adopt the same attitude towards Christianity. In Ambrose's view the discovery of the Cross and especially that of the nails made possible the establishment of hereditary Christian rule, because with this event the prophecy of Zechariah 14:20, predicting the Christian reign, had been fulfilled.⁵⁷ Ambrose's emphasis on the Christianity of the emperors and the *hereditas fidei* might well have been engendered by an ingrained fear that not every emperor would automatically show himself a Christian and that a return to paganism was still a real possibility.⁵⁸ The reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363) naturally reinforced this fear.

Ambrose's version of the legend is substantially different from the versions of both the church historians, and of Paulinus and Sulpicius. Not only does he refer more than the others to biblical passages, but he also omits vital elements of the legend. Before relating the actual story of the finding of the Cross, Ambrose dedicates two paragraphs to Helena (chs. 41-42). Constantine is here praised for having such a mother, and Helena's low social descent (*stabularia*) and her relationship with Constantius Chlorus are mentioned, as well as her rise to power.

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Helena travels to Jerusalem out of concern for Constantine.
2. Inspired by the Holy Spirit to search for the Cross, she goes to Golgotha.
3. At Golgotha Helena delivers a monologue in which Satan is accused of withholding the symbol of victory of eternal life, which she, however, will bring to light again. In this way she will defeat Satan for a second time. It was Mary who was the first to defeat him by giving birth to Christ.

Weise mit dem Kontext verbundenen Legende ... eine Einheit darstellt ...". See also F.A. Consolino, 1984, 174.

⁵⁶ *De Ob. Theod.* 40: *post se hereditatem fidei principibus dereliquit.*

⁵⁷ W. Steidle, 1978, 99: "... die Analogie der hereditas-Motive und das Faktum [i.e. the existence of the heredity of the Christian emperorship] fordern vielmehr unbedingt einen Zusatz und den liefert die Legende."

⁵⁸ A similar fear is expressed by Ambrose's letters 17 and 18 to Valentinian II, written as a reaction to Symmachus' request to replace the altar of Victory in the *curia* of the Roman senate. Here, Ambrose warns the emperor in an aggressive tone not to concede to the request of the pagan senators. See for this affair R. Klein, 1972.

4. The ground is excavated and Helena finds three crosses lying jumbled together, but is uncertain which one is the Cross of Christ.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. Falling back on the Gospel accounts, Helena identifies the True Cross by the fact it is lying in the middle. However, the ultimate proof is provided by the *titulus* which was attached to the Cross by Pontius Pilate to make it recognizable for future generations.

2. Helena worships God who is symbolized by the Cross; she touches the sacred wood as a result of which the Holy Spirit becomes part of her.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

1. Helena searches for the nails and finds them.

2. She orders to have a bridle made from one nail, and has the other one put in the emperor's diadem, as a result of which the emperor and empire are saved.

3. Bridle and diadem are passed down by Constantine to his successors; in this way the Christianity of the empire is guaranteed. The authority of the Christian emperors is based on *sanctum quod super frenum (equi)* (Zech. 14:20), while the nail of the Cross in the diadem worn by the emperor guarantees a Christian empire governed by rulers who have become preachers of the faith.

4. The Church celebrates the establishment of a Christian empire, but the Jews are put to shame. By putting Christ to death, they tried to defeat Christianity, but are themselves now defeated by the discovery of the tools they had used to execute Jesus.

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress). —Completely omitted by Ambrose.

The Ambrosian version of the legend clearly differs considerably from all other versions.⁵⁹ The reason behind this is to be found in the overriding importance for Ambrose of his main theme: the *hereditas fidei*. For Ambrose, the legend takes second place and he does not scruple to omit many elements mentioned by other authors. Thus the demolition of the Venus/Aphrodite temple/statue on Golgotha for instance, the identification of the Cross by

⁵⁹ For the uniqueness of Ambrose's version, see M. Sordi, 1990.

Macarius through a miraculous healing,⁶⁰ the building of churches by Helena and the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem and Helena's other activities are all left out by Ambrose. At the same time, new elements are inserted, such as Helena's speech to Satan, the parallelism between Helena and Mary, the nails as symbols of a Christian reign and the defeat of the Jews by the finding of the Cross and nails.

Although it was Constantine who left a Christian empire to his successors, Ambrose ascribes an even more prominent role in the process of Christianization to Helena. She is the one who, as instrument of God and under inspiration from the Holy Spirit,⁶¹ actually fulfils Zechariah's prophecy by offering her son the nails.⁶² In Ambrose's view, by finding the Cross and the nails Helena has rescued the emperors⁶³ and has made them adherents and preachers of the Christian faith instead of persecutors.⁶⁴ Ambrose's connection of the legend with the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy means that in his version the main event is not the discovery and identification of the Cross, but the finding of the nails. Helena's discovery of the nails, described as a matter of minor importance by all other authors of the legend, is regarded by Ambrose as a fact of the utmost importance because it fulfils the prophecy and establishes the Christian reign which is guaranteed by the *hereditas fidei*. Ambrose's version of the legend gives the impression that the bishop thought that Helena had a more important role in the christianization of the empire than her son Constantine.⁶⁵ It is Helena who quite unaided defeats Satan. Satan had for many years kept the Cross hidden, thereby delaying redemption and

⁶⁰ It is conceivable that Ambrose did not know this part of the legend. It may well be that he, like John Chrysostom (*Hom.* 85 = *PG* 59, 461), was familiar with a less elaborate version of the legend in which the Cross was recognized by its central position and by Pilate's inscription. The intervention of Macarius and the miracles performed in identifying the Cross, as related in other versions of the legend, were not yet included.

⁶¹ *De Ob. Theod.* 40, 43, 45, 46.

⁶² Of the other authors of the legend of Helena apart from Ambrose, only Sozomen and Theodoret refer to Zechariah's prophecy. Jerome's cynical judgment of Ambrose's reference to this prophecy with regard to the establishment of the Christian reign may have prevented others from referring to it. Jerome, *In Zachariam* = *CC ser. lat.* 76A, 898, 801-804: *Audivi a quodam rem, pio quidem sensu dictam, sed ridiculam, clavos dominicae crucis, e quibus Constantinus Magnus frenos suo equo fecerit, sanctum Domini appellari. Hoc utrum ita accipiendum sit, lectoris prudentiae derelinquo.*

⁶³ *De Ob. Theod.* 47: ... *visitata est, ut redimerentur imperatores.*

⁶⁴ *De Ob. Theod.* 48: ... *ut sint praedicatores, qui persecutores esse consueverant.* See G.H. Kramer, 1983, 139-140.

⁶⁵ See F.A. Consolino, 1984, 168.

causing the suppression of Christianity. Ambrose's comparison of Helena with the virgin Mary is of theological interest. Helena is depicted by Ambrose as a second Mary. While Mary defeated Satan by giving birth to Christ, Helena defeats him a second time by finding and identifying the Cross. Through Helena's discovery of the Cross Christ is reborn, as a result of which the Christian empire is established.⁶⁶

In conclusion Ambrose clearly tells a different version of the story of the finding of the Cross. In this account Helena performs a very central role. Her finding of the Cross and especially her discovery of the nails not only has religious implications but also has political consequences. In bringing the Cross and nails to light, Helena establishes a Christian empire, the emperors of which are responsible for guarding Christianity by making the faith hereditary. It is the hereditariness of the faith which Ambrose wants to impress on the successors of Theodosius I, a hereditariness confirmed by the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy.

Paulinus of Nola presents his version of the legend of the discovery of the Cross in a letter,⁶⁷ written in 403 to his friend Sulpicius Severus in Primuliacum.⁶⁸ Paulinus' letter is a reply to Sulpicius' request for a relic of a saint for the occasion of the dedication of the newly built basilica in Primuliacum. Paulinus says that he has no relics of saints but that he will send him instead a relic of the Cross. Paulinus was given this relic by Melania the Elder, who in her turn had received it from John, Bishop of Jerusalem (385-417).⁶⁹ Paulinus sends the relic enclosed in a golden casing.⁷⁰ After some remarks about the value of the gift and especially about its minuteness, by which Sulpicius should not be disappointed since, despite its minimal size, it represents

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 165-166. Ambrose's comparison of Helena with Mary may have been influenced by the interest of the Theodosian empresses in Christ's mother; see M. Warner, 1983, 86-87, 291. According to P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 188-189, a comparison between Helena and Mary was already drawn by Eusebius, *VC* III 43, in his description of Helena's activities in Bethlehem.

⁶⁷ *Epist.* 31,4-5.

⁶⁸ For the date of the letter see J.T. Lienhard, 1977, 182-187; C. Stancliffe, 1983, 80. See for the friendship between Sulpicius and Paulinus C. Stancliffe, 1983, 16-19, 32-34, 45-46.

⁶⁹ Paulinus, *Epist.* 31,1: *quod nobis bonum benedicta Melanius ab Hierusalem munere sancti inde episcopi Iohannis adtulit* For the relationship between Melania and Paulinus, see below pp. 119-121. As appears from Paulinus, *Epist.* 32,7-8, the relic of the Cross was placed among relics of apostles and saints underneath the altar in the basilica of Primuliacum. Part of the relic of the Cross which Paulinus was given by Melania remained behind in Nola, where it was also preserved beneath the altar (Paulinus, *Epist.* 32,11).

⁷⁰ *Epist.* 31,2.

the power of the faith, Paulinus announces that he thinks it fit to relate the story how the Cross was preserved and eventually discovered “because our faith seems to demand it and it is worth knowing”.⁷¹

Paulinus’ version differs considerably from that of Ambrose, but it is also at variance with the versions of the church historians. The main difference in comparison with the latter lies in the composition of the narrative, especially the order in which the several events are presented. Helena’s church building activities—Paulinus attributes to her the foundation of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of Nativity and the shrine on the Mount of Olives—as well as personal information about the empress—her co-regency with the title Augusta for instance, and the fact she had the imperial purse at her disposal—are mentioned by Paulinus at the beginning of his narrative.⁷² The existence since the time of Hadrian of a pagan sanctuary at the site of the Passion, a statue of Jupiter instead of a temple/statue of Venus/Aphrodite, is not included in the actual story about the discovery of the Cross but is also presented by Paulinus at an earlier stage.⁷³ After presenting this kind of preliminary information about Helena, the relating of the actual discovery begins in 31,5. However, an analysis of Paulinus’ account of the finding of the sacred wood into principal and subordinate themes, reveals that the contents of his narrative does not in fact differ greatly from that of the church historians.

⁷¹ *Epist.* 31,3.

⁷² *Epist.* 31,4.

⁷³ This statue of Jupiter was, according to Paulinus, *Epist.* 31,3, set up in the time of Hadrian *in loco passionis* to destroy the Christian faith. For the same reason Bethlehem was polluted with a shrine dedicated to Adonis: *nam Hadrianus imperator existimans se fidem Christianam loci iniuria peremptorum in loco passionis simulacrum Iovis consecravit, et Bethlehem Adonidis fano profanata est, ut quasi radix et fundamentum ecclesiae tolleretur, si in his locis idola colerentur, in quibus Christus natus est ut pateretur, passus est ut resurgeret, surrexit ut regnaret iudex vel rex iudicaret.* Paulinus most probably derived this information from Jerome’s *Epist.* 58,3, a letter addressed to himself: *Ab Adriani temporibus usque ad imperium Constantini per annos circiter centum octoginta in loco resurrectionis simulacrum Iovis, in crucis rupe statua ex marmore Veneris a gentilibus posita colebatur, aestimantibus persecutionis auctoribus quod tollerent nobis fidem resurrectionis et crucis, si loca sancta per idola polluerent. Bethlehem nunc nostram, et augustissimam orbis locum ... lucus inumbrabat Thamuz, id est Adonidis, et in specu ubi quondam Christus parvulus vagiit Veneris amasius plangebatur.* The letter of Jerome to Paulinus is dated in 394-396 (J. Labourt, *St. Jérôme. Lettres* 3, Paris 1953, 235). For the correspondence between Jerome and Paulinus, see J.T. Lienhard, 1977, 98-100. Remarkably enough, Paulinus does not mention the statue of Venus *in crucis rupe* and situates the statue of Jupiter *in loco passionis* whereas Jerome locates it *in loco resurrectionis*.

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Inspired by God, Helena goes to Jerusalem to cleanse the Christian sites from pagan pollution. Constantine approves of this mission.
2. Helena visits all holy sites in Jerusalem and its vicinity in order to confirm with her own eyes the truth of the faith she has gained by listening and reading.
3. Helena is eager to seek the Cross, the hiding place of which had almost sunk into oblivion with the passing of so many years of *superstitio*. A suitable informant not being available, she is inspired by the Holy Spirit to invite learned Christians as well as the most learned of the Jews to inform her about the site of the Passion.
4. On the basis of their knowledge and a personal revelation, she orders digging operations at the site of the Passion. The digging was done by soldiers and civilians.
5. Three crosses are found, but the faithful do not know which one is Christ's Cross and they are afraid of mistaking the cross of a thief for the Lord's Cross.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. Through the counsel of God himself, Helena orders a dead man to be sought out and brought to her.
2. After contact with the first two crosses the man remains dead, but after the touch of the third cross he instantly returns to life. It was fitting that Christ's Cross, concealed by God from the Jews and gentiles for many generations, was discovered by its power to bring about a resurrection.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

1. The Cross is consecrated by the foundation of a basilica at the site of the Passion and is preserved in a hidden sanctuary.

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress). — This theme is missing, though Paulinus provides some information about Helena in his preliminary remarks in 31,4 (see above p. 114).

Many elements mentioned by the church historians are omitted by Paulinus: the temple/statue of Venus/Aphrodite, the *titulus*, the part played by Macarius in the identification of the Cross, the finding of the nails and the sending of part of the Cross and the nails to Constantine. New elements inserted by Paulinus are the

summoning of learned Christians and Jews by Helena to inform her about the site of the Passion⁷⁴ and the replacing of a mortally sick woman by a dead man. However, the number of similarities between the version of Paulinus and those of the church historians is striking enough to suggest a common source (see below ch. 4).

Sulpicius' version of the legend in his *Chronicle* (II 33-34) is evidently derived from Paulinus' letter.⁷⁵ Apart from his *Vita Martini*, the *Chronicle*, which covered history from the Creation until c.400, belongs to Sulpicius' most important works. Written in c.403 it was no chronicle of the world, like the chronicle of Eusebius, but presented for example, a fragmentary history of the Jews, a survey of the persecutions of the Christians and a summary of the christological controversy. Although it is obvious that Paulinus' letter was his source for the legend of the Cross, Sulpicius does not copy the words of Paulinus indiscriminately. Sulpicius' version is shorter and in fact reproduces Paulinus' version of the legend rather inaccurately. Sulpicius does not mention Helena's questioning of learned Christians and Jews. Whereas Paulinus mentions that the site of the Passion was adorned by a statue of Jupiter, Sulpicius is less specific; he only refers to *daemonum simulacra*.⁷⁶ One remarkable difference with Paulinus is the role ascribed to the Jews. Sulpicius holds them solely responsible for having kept the Cross hidden and for having thus delayed its dedication.⁷⁷ Paulinus shows a more impartial attitude here when he ascribes the fact that the Cross was not dedicated earlier to *superstitionis inopiae diuturnitas*.⁷⁸

Where structure is concerned, however, Sulpicius' legend reflects that of Paulinus. Following his source, Sulpicius provides information about Helena's building of churches and personal

⁷⁴ Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 7, mentions the questioning of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

⁷⁵ C. Stancliffe, 1983, 80: "... the Chronicle uses material taken from a letter of Paulinus to Sulpicius, which was ... written in 403", i.e. *Epist.* 31. The best proof for Paulinus being Sulpicius' source is the episode about the building of the church at the Mount of Olives which both authors add to their stories about the discovery of the Cross. Both relate as a curiosity that the soil of the Mount of Olives, i.e. the soil which the Lord's feet had touched, throws off in contempt any covering of marble or paving (Paulinus, *Epist.* 31,4 and Sulpicius *Chron.* II 33). Probably Melania the Elder, who lived in a monastery on the Mount of Olives and must have been familiar with the local stories about the place, had told Paulinus this tale.

⁷⁶ *Chron.* II 31.

⁷⁷ *Chron.* II 34: ... *crux Domini ... neque in principio obsistentibus Iudaeis potuerat consecrari*

⁷⁸ *Epist.* 31,5.

information about the empress before he begins the actual narrative about the discovery of the Cross. Sulpicius omits the same elements as Paulinus in comparison with the church historians.

I. Helena journeys to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

1. Helena goes to Jerusalem out of eagerness to visit the city.
2. She searches for the Cross which as a result of the resistance of the Jews had been buried and kept hidden.
3. After Helena has been informed about the site of the Passion, she orders digging operations. The digging is done by soldiers and civilians.
4. Three similar crosses are found but the faithful do not know which one is Christ's Cross and they are afraid that they might perhaps choose the cross of a thief in mistake for the Lord's Cross.

II. The identification of the True Cross.

1. A man who had recently died is brought to the crosses.
2. At the touch of the first two crosses the man remains lifeless, but after the touch of the third cross the man instantly comes back to life.

III. Construction of the church, the sending of the nails and part of the Cross to Constantine, the preservation of the Cross in Jerusalem.

1. The Cross is consecrated. (Sulpicius has already referred briefly to Helena's building churches at the sites of the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension in II 33.⁷⁹)

IV. Helena's other activities (and information about the empress). — This theme is missing, though Sulpicius mentions in II 33 that Helena as Augusta was Constantine's co-regent.

In comparison with Paulinus' version that of Sulpicius is stripped of its religiosity. Whereas in Paulinus' version Helena acts under the continuous inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in Sulpicius' version she operates independently and uninspired by any religious force whatever. For Sulpicius the discovery of the Cross was apparently simply yet another episode in Christian history which he felt was worth including in his *Chronicle*.

⁷⁹ Unlike Paulinus, Sulpicius does not mention the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOURCES OF THE HELENA LEGEND

The versions of the legend included in the *Church Histories* all go back to one principal source, the *Church History* of Gelasius of Caesarea. But which sources did Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus have at their disposal? This question is easy to answer in the case of Sulpicius. His source was Paulinus' Letter 31. But how did Paulinus become familiar with the story? He definitely did not obtain it from Ambrose. His version and that of the Milanese bishop have too little in common. However, Paulinus' version shows several similarities with the versions of the church historians. Could it be possible that Paulinus derived his knowledge about the legend from Rufinus' *Church History*, the only ecclesiastical work containing the legend of the Cross which he could possibly have known?

At the beginning of the fifth century Paulinus and Rufinus had close connections with certain circles of the senatorial aristocracy in Rome. As a consequence of the controversy which raged over Jerome's and Rufinus' Latin translations of Origen's *Peri Archon*, the Christian senators had divided into two opposite camps.¹ The one, led by the *virgo* Marcella and the senator Pammachius, had taken Jerome's side, while the other, headed by Melania the Elder, had taken the side of Rufinus. Paulinus, a relative of Melania,² had sided with Rufinus despite his relationship as correspondent with Jerome.³ When at the end of 397 Rufinus finally left Jerusalem and returned to Italy, he found support from Melania's relatives. Melania and Rufinus had been close for years. Rufinus was Melania's spiritual mentor⁴ and together they had founded a combined monastery and convent on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.⁵ In Italy Rufinus came into contact with Avita, a niece

¹ See P. Brown, 1970, 57-58.

² Paulinus, *Epist.* 29,5.

³ Letters 53, 58 and 85 of Jerome are addressed to Paulinus. Jerome's last letter to Paulinus dates from after the conflict between Jerome and Rufinus; see J. Labourt, *St. Jérôme. Lettres* 3, Paris (Budé) 1953, 235. After Paulinus had taken sides with Rufinus his relationship with Jerome worsened; see P. Courcelle, 1947, esp. 266-271.

⁴ Paulinus, *Epist.* 28,5.

⁵ Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 46 (ed. Butler). F.X. Murphy, 1945, 51-58; F.X. Murphy, 1947, 70-71.

of Melania, and her husband Apronianus. This contact is revealed by the Latin translations of several sermons of eastern Church Fathers made by Rufinus for Apronianus, possibly in 399.⁶ In 399 Rufinus had settled in Aquileia, where he stayed until 407, working amongst other things on his *Church History*.

Whether Rufinus and Paulinus ever met is uncertain. A meeting may have taken place in 407 when Rufinus visited Apronianus, Avita, Melania the Younger and her husband Pinianus at their family estate in Campania.⁷ It is in these years that a small correspondence between Paulinus and Rufinus developed, but this correspondence is of too late a date to be of value for determining whether Paulinus' version of the legend of the Cross was derived from that of Rufinus.⁸ Their earlier chances for contact were probably rare. Only in 403/404 can a direct contact be inferred from a letter of Paulinus to Sulpicius. In one of his letters to Sulpicius Severus, who had asked him for information for his *annalibus non unius gentis, sed generis humani*, Paulinus writes that he himself is not able to give the required information, but that he will ask Rufinus for it because he might be able to provide Sulpicius with it.⁹ Paulinus adds that if Rufinus does not know the answer to Sulpicius' questions, nobody "in these regions" will be able to help him.¹⁰ Unfortunately, neither Paulinus' letter to Rufinus on this matter nor Rufinus' reply is known, but it is clear from the fact that Paulinus asked Rufinus historical questions that he "was evidently aware of Rufinus' historical interests as exhibited in his translation of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius ...".¹¹ However, Paulinus had already at this time written down his version of the legend and therefore it does not seem very plausible that he had become acquainted with the story of the discovery of the Cross through Rufinus or through the reading of his *Church History*, which was finished in c.402. Moreover, there is a more obvious source from which Paulinus could have become familiar

⁶ See N. Moine, 1980, 27ff., for Apronianus and Avita and the date of the translation of the sermons; see also F.X. Murphy, 1956, 80-81. F.X. Murphy, 1945, 111-112, even thinks that Rufinus was responsible for Apronianus' conversion to Christianity.

⁷ F.X. Murphy, 1956, 86. Cf. C.P. Hammond, 1977, 381.

⁸ Paulinus' letters 46 and 47 are addressed to Rufinus. See for their correspondence F.X. Murphy, 1956, 84-90.

⁹ Paulinus, *Epist.* 28,5. The date of the letter is not certain. The years 402, 403 and 404 are mentioned; see C.P. Hammond, 1977, 381.

¹⁰ Paulinus, *Epist.* 28,5. See also F.X. Murphy, 1956, 83; C. Stancliffe, 1983, 69.

¹¹ F.X. Murphy, 1956, 84.

with the legend, namely an oral account of the legend as given by Melania the Elder.

As mentioned above, Melania lived for many years in Jerusalem where, together with Rufinus, she had in c.380 founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives. Two years after Rufinus' return to Italy, Melania also temporarily came back, probably out of concern for the spiritual well-being of her family and the conflict between Jerome and Rufinus.¹² She travelled by ship to Naples, whence she continued her journey overland to Rome. Travelling from Naples to Rome in the first months of 400, she made a stop in Nola to visit her relative Paulinus.¹³ Paulinus sent to Sulpicius a report of her stay in Nola in one of his letters.¹⁴ Her visit was definitely not a quick duty call. It must have taken up several days. Paulinus had the opportunity to read to her Sulpicius' *Vita Martini*, and after her long stay in the Holy Land¹⁵ Melania must have wanted extensive information about the network of relationships within the Christian senatorial aristocracy and the clergy, especially with respect to the controversy between Rufinus and Jerome. Paulinus, because of his connections with the senatorial aristocracy, was the very man to give Melania all the information she needed.

On the occasion of her visit to Nola, Melania presented Paulinus with a splinter of the Cross which she had been given by John, Bishop of Jerusalem (385-417). It is a plausible conjecture that when Melania gave the relic to Paulinus, she also told him the story about the discovery of the Cross. Melania undoubtedly knew the story. She had lived for two decades in Jerusalem, the centre of the cult of the Cross. She must have been familiar with the veneration of the Cross on Good Friday and with the annual celebration of its discovery,¹⁶ in which festivities, as a pious woman, she must have participated. It is therefore barely conceivable that

¹² Her granddaughter Melania the Younger wanted to lead an ascetic life but was prevented to do so by her father Publicola, son of Melania the Elder; see *Vita Sanctae Melaniae* 6 (ed. SC, Gorce); Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 54 (ed. Butler). F.X. Murphy, 1947, 73: "It was out of concern over her family's spiritual welfare, as well as because of the unpleasantness of life in Jerusalem upon the outbreak of a rash of anti-Origenism, that Melania seems to have made up her mind to return to Rome ... towards the close of 399." See also F.X. Murphy, 1945, 155-156.

¹³ For the date of her return, see N. Moine, 1980, 25ff.

¹⁴ Paulinus, *Epist.* 29,8-14.

¹⁵ Paulinus, *Epist.* 29,6, mentions that she had stayed in the East for twenty-five years. Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 46 (ed. Butler), mentions twenty-seven years.

¹⁶ See *It. Egeriae* 37,1-3; 48.

she did not know the legend. She could have heard the legend from Bishop John from whom she had received the relic of the Cross, but it is also more than possible that she heard the story told in Jerusalem by common believers or pilgrims. Apart from oral sources, she may have become familiar with the legend by way of a written source. Melania showed an interest in theological treatises and works of history.¹⁷ Possibly she had read Gelasius of Caesarea's *Church History*. Knowing that Rufinus translated this work and added it to his own *Church History*, it seems likely that his close companion Melania also knew it.

Melania told Paulinus the story herself when she presented him with the splinter of the Cross. It now becomes evident why Paulinus' text of the legend shows so many similarities with the Gelasian/Rufinian version and those of the other church historians. All came from the same source, which had its origins in Jerusalem. The fact that Paulinus knew the legend in an oral form may explain why not all elements included by the church historians are part of his version or why new elements are added.¹⁸ It is possible that Paulinus had forgotten part of the story in the period between 400, when he became acquainted with the legend, and 403, when he put the story on paper for Sulpicius. It is also possible that Melania did not tell him the whole story and accidentally or deliberately left out some elements, like, for instance, the part about the nails. The finding of the nails seems not to have been an important element of the story. It is mentioned in a few words by all authors, except Ambrose. But it might also be that Melania did not consider the discovery of the nails of great relevance to her present. Why tell about the finding of the nails and their sending to Constantine when it had nothing to do with the present itself, the relic of the Cross?

Thus it seems likely that Paulinus' source for the legend was Melania's oral account of the story. It now remains to determine how Ambrose came to know the legend. Apart from the separation of time and space, the many discrepancies between the two accounts make it impossible that Ambrose derived his knowledge of the legend from Gelasius' *Church History*. Another source must therefore be looked for.

¹⁷ Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 55 (ed. Butler), mentions her interest in theological treatises. Paulinus, *Epist.* 29,14, mentions her interest in historical works like the *Vita Martini* of Sulpicius Severus.

¹⁸ In the case of oral transmission it is usual for stories to change; see A.B. Lord, 1974⁶, esp. chapters 4 and 5.

The Gelasian/Rufinian and the Paulinian versions of the legend have their origin in Jerusalem (see below ch. 6). Could Ambrose's source also have the same origin? At the end of the fourth century there was a busy traffic of pilgrims from all parts of the empire to Palestine and Jerusalem. The Bordeaux pilgrim, Melania and Egeria are the famous representatives of a large anonymous mass of pilgrims travelling to and from the Holy Land. For pilgrims coming from the western provinces of the empire there were two main routes for reaching Palestine: land and sea. Melania travelled by ship to Egypt and the Holy Land, but the pilgrim from Bordeaux made his journey over land, using the extensive Roman road system. On his way to the holy places as well as on his return trip, the Bordeaux pilgrim visited Milan, which was an important junction in the Roman network of roads.¹⁹ For pilgrims coming from Gaul or Spain, Milan was an important stopping place. Many must have come here, possibly to assemble and to continue their journey together, or, when they were on their way home again, to continue their journey alone. While some pilgrims presented an account of their pilgrimage in written form, most of them must have handed on their experiences orally, telling of their impressions and relating the stories they had heard. It is more than possible that Ambrose had picked up the story about the finding of the Cross in his own city from pilgrims who had visited Jerusalem, had seen the Cross and had heard the story about its discovery. Ambrose must have recognized the importance of the story and thus adapted it to his *hereditas fidei* theme and included it in his funeral oration for Theodosius.

It is also possible that Ambrose acquired his information about the legend from the Theodosian court. The women at the court of Theodosius, especially Aelia Flaccilla, wife of Theodosius I, were famous for their piety. Helena's memory was cherished by them. She was considered the ideal Christian empress, whose pious life was an example for all the Theodosian empresses. Aelia Flaccilla was the first after Helena once more to receive the rank of Augusta, and like Helena she was glorified for her offspring.²⁰ The memory of Helena was thus held in great reverence at the Theodosian court. This also makes it understandable why Ambrose spoke about Helena and her discovery at such length in his funeral speech. Had she been a person of no importance, his digression about her would have made no sense. Presumably, the story of

¹⁹ See E.D. Hunt, 1982, 55ff. For a map of pilgrim routes, see *ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ K.G. Holum, 1982, 23-24, 26-27, 31.

Helena's discovery of the Cross was known in court circles, and it is therefore possible that Ambrose had become acquainted with the legend through his continuous contact with the court.

Whether Ambrose got his information from pilgrims or from the Theodosian court or perhaps from both, he probably only knew the legend in oral form. It is therefore hard to determine how similar the story he had heard was to that of Gelasius, the main version, and to what extent he adapted the story to make it suitable for inclusion in his funeral oration. Did he omit elements like, for instance, the demolition of the temple of Aphrodite and the construction of the basilica at Golgotha just because he did not know them, or because they did not serve his purpose? Ambrose like John Chrysostom mentions that the Cross was identified by the *titulus* and not by a healing miracle,²¹ and this might suggest that he was not familiar with the elaborated version of the legend as first written down by Gelasius of Caesarea. However, it is beyond doubt that Ambrose adapted the legend considerably. He included unique episodes, like Helena's speech to Satan and the parallelism between Helena and Mary, and he is the first, and one of the few, to connect the discovery of the Cross and especially that of the nails with the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah. His radical adaptations of the legend and the way he uses the story in his funeral speech for Theodosius to emphasize his message of *hereditas fidei*, makes Ambrose's version of the legend of Helena unique among the other versions of the legend.

²¹ Joh. Chrys., *In Iohannem*, Hom. 85 = PG 59, 461.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE *VITA CONSTANTINI* AS A SOURCE FOR THE
HELENA LEGEND

The legendary story about the discovery of the Cross contains several historical elements. Of course Constantine, Helena and Macarius were real living persons. Also the basilica on Golgotha and the other churches mentioned are historical. The same applies to the silver casket in which the Cross was preserved in Jerusalem. From Egeria's itinerary we know that such a shrine was indeed present in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Egeria speaks of a *loculus argenteus deauratus, in quo est lignum sanctum crucis*.¹ No doubt the same shrine is meant in the legend. But the historical framework for the legend was provided by the paragraphs about Helena in Eusebius' *VC*.

A comparative reading of the various versions of the legend of Helena reveals that they contain several elements borrowed from Eusebius' *VC*. Gelasius of Caesarea certainly used the *VC* as one of the sources for his *Church History*, and so did the other church historians.² Most of the church historians copied the legend of the discovery of the Cross, including the passages derived from the *VC*, directly from Gelasius/Rufinus. However, Socrates and Sozomen each and independently turned to the *VC* and used it as a source. That is why their references to the *VC* are greater in number than those of the other church historians. This emerges clearly from the comparison below, which indicates which passages are derived from the *VC*. In this list the versions of Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus are deliberately omitted because their references to the *VC* are only occasional and were probably already included in their oral sources. It is furthermore highly improbable that they were familiar with the contents of the *VC*. As far as is known, extracts of the *VC* only reached the Latin West in the sixth century through the *Historia Tripartita*, while the first complete Latin translation of the work is dated as late as 1544.³

¹ *It. Egeriae* 37,1.

² A. Linder, 1975, 48: "... it was this source [the *VC*] which provided the major church historians of the fifth century—Socrates, Sozomenus and Theodoret—with most of their factual information concerning Constantine ...".

³ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

- Rufinus X 7 (*Per idem ... Hierosolymam petit*)—VC III 42,1
 Rufinus X 7 (*Qui idcirco ... fuerat defixum*)—VC III 26,3
 Rufinus X 7 (... *cuncta ... ruderibus*)—VC III 26,7; 27
 Rufinus X 8 (... *templum ... construxit*)—VC III 25; 29,1
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,117 (*ἡ τοῦ βασιλέως ... παρεγένετο*)—VC III 42,1
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,117 (*Οἱ δὲ ... τοῦ τόπου*)—VC III 26,3
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,117 (*καθελοῦσα ... ἐργασαμένη*)—VC III 26,7; 27
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,120 (*ἡ δὲ τοῦ ... ποιήσασα*)—VC III 25; 29,1⁴
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,120 (*Ἐχορήγει ... οἰκοδομάς*)—VC III 29,2; 30-32
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,120 (*ἡ δὲ τοῦ ... ἀναλήψεως*)—VC III 43,1
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,121 (*Πολλὰ δὲ ... πένησιν*)—VC III 44; 45
 Socrates I 17=PG 67,121 (*εὐσεβῶς ... ἀπετέθη*)—VC III 46; 47
 Sozomen II 1,2 (*περὶ δὲ τὸν ... τόπους*)—VC III 42,1
 Sozomen II 1,3 (*οἱ γὰρ πάλαι ... σεβάσματος*)—VC III 26,2-3
 Sozomen II 1,5 (*τηνικαῦτα ... ἄντρον*)—VC III 27; 28
 Sozomen II 2,1 (*ἰαμφὶ δὲ τοῦτον ... τὸ ἔργον*)—VC III 29⁵
 Sozomen II 2,1 (*ἐν μέρει ... ἀνελήφθη*)—VC III 43,1
 Sozomen II 2,3 (*τηνικαῦτα ... ἡλευθέρωσε*)—VC III 42,1; 44; 45
 Sozomen II 2,4 (*Σεβαστή ... ἐχρήτο*)—VC III 47,2-3
 Sozomen II 2,4 (*ἐπεὶ δὲ ... γεγονυῖα*)—VC III 46,1⁶
 Theodoret I 18,1 (*Τούτοις ... ἡ μήτηρ*)—VC III 30-32
 Theodoret I 18,1 (*αὕτη τῶν ... κατείληφεν*)—VC III 42,1; 46,1
 Theodoret I 18,2 (*εὐθὺς μὲν ... προσέταξε*)—VC III 26,7; 27
 Theodoret I 18,7 (*πάντοθεν ... ἐδομήσατο*)—VC III 43
 The main elements derived from the VC are the following:
 — Helena's visit to Jerusalem (VC III 42,1)
 — The statue/temple of Venus/Aphrodite on the site of Christ's tomb (VC III 26,3)
 — The demolition of the statue/temple and the digging up of the ground (VC III 26,7; 27)

⁴ The "New Jerusalem" mentioned in this sentence is borrowed from VC III 33,1.

⁵ See F. Winkelmann, 1962, 84. See also VC III 30-32, Constantine's letter to Macarius.

⁶ See also G. Schoo, 1911, 33.

- The building of the basilica on the site of the tomb (*VC* III 25; 29,1)
- The building of churches by Helena in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives (*VC* III 43,1)
- Helena's charitable works and her death at c.80 years of age (*VC* III 44-47)

Not all elements are included by the church historians. Theodoret's borrowings from the *VC* are considerably smaller in number than those of Socrates and Sozomen. Socrates derived the story about the discovery of the Cross directly from Gelasius/Rufinus,⁷ but for the additional information he provides about Helena he must have consulted the *VC*. It is beyond doubt that Sozomen used it independently as a source for his *Church History*.⁸ He used the *VC* to present a more detailed account of the discovery of the Cross and of Helena's role than his predecessors had given. For example, Sozomen's remark that Christ's tomb had been covered by an artificial, paved hill when the temple of Aphrodite was built, was borrowed from *VC* III 26,3.⁹ Sozomen gives much more information about Helena than the other church historians. He mentions her concern for the poor, for prisoners and exiles (*VC* III 42), her proclamation as Augusta, her portrait on coins and her privilege of being able to spend freely from the imperial treasury (*VC* III 47). Sozomen is also a much more critical reader of the *VC* than Gelasius/Rufinus, Socrates and Theodoret. While these writers consider Helena to be the central person of the legend, Sozomen also gives a great deal of prominence to Constantine. According to Sozomen, it was Constantine and not Helena, as the others allege, who ordered the artificial hill to be excavated (see *VC* III 27). It was also Constantine and not Helena who ordered a basilica to be built on Golgotha (see *VC* 29; 30-32). Sozomen obviously attached more historical value to the *VC* than his fellow church historians, who allege that Helena was responsible for the construction of the church on Golgotha.

⁷ According to A. Glas, 1914, 80-82, Socrates used Rufinus' Latin and not Gelasius' Greek *Church History* as his source.

⁸ G. Schoo, 1911, 34: "... Soz. [ist] bei der Benützung der V.C. des Eusebius durchaus selbständig zu Werke gegangen; er zieht eine ganze Reihe von Kapiteln aus der V.C. heran, die Socr. überschlagen hat, während er andere, die Socr. ubenützt hat, seinerseits übergeht." F. Winkelmann, 1962, 83: "Sozomenus geht über Socrates hinaus selbständig auf die VC als Quelle zurück ...".

⁹ On which source his allegation is founded that Golgotha was surrounded by a wall (*Hist. Eccl.* II 1) is not clear.

It is not certain whether Theodoret used the *VC* as a source for his narrative about the finding of the Cross. Since his borrowings from it are fewer in number than those of Gelasius/Rufinus, Socrates and Sozomen, this does not seem probable. However, Theodoret's version of the legend differs in one important respect from those of the other church historians. Whereas Gelasius/Rufinus and Socrates allege that Helena's visit to Jerusalem was inspired by divine dreams and visions, and Sozomen thinks her motive was to visit and pray at the holy sites, Theodoret alleges she came to Jerusalem to deliver Constantine's letter about the building of the basilica on Golgotha to Macarius (*VC* III 30-32). It might be that he derived this motive from the *VC*.

Although the *VC* supplied the historical data for the legend of the Cross, the same work also gave rise to confusion. As we have seen above (p. 84ff.), there is some uncertainty about the meaning of Eusebius' expression *τὸ γνῶρισμα τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου ἐκείνου πάθους* (*VC* III 30,1). The same uncertainty possessed the church historians, as a result of which they hold contradictory opinions about the site where the Cross was hidden and found. According to Gelasius/Rufinus, Helena looked for the site of the crucifixion and when she had found the Cross there, built a church on this site. Socrates, confused by Eusebius' account, maintains that Helena searched for the site of Christ's grave, located it and found three crosses in the tomb. After the identification of the True Cross, a basilica was built on the site of the tomb. Sozomen presents a very complicated state of affairs. According to him, God revealed to Helena the hiding-place of the Cross. When she began to dig, she discovered the tomb and not very far away from it she found the three crosses. According to Theodoret, Helena dug at the site of the Passion and discovered Christ's grave and near it the three crosses. There seems to have been great uncertainty among the church historians about the actual site of the discovery of the Cross. This confusion arises on one hand from the fact that the site of the Passion and that of the tomb are considered one and the same site,¹⁰ which was covered by one magnificent Christian sanctuary. On the other hand, Eusebius may be held responsible for the contradictory opinions propounded by the church historians. Eusebius is unclear in his *VC* about the motive behind the building of the basilica in Jerusalem. Though he alleges that the basilica was built as the result of the discovery

¹⁰ John 19:41-42.

of Christ's tomb, the church historians must have interpreted the expression *τὸ γνῶρισμα τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου ἐκείνου πάθους* as a reference to the Cross. Some church historians settled for a compromise by locating the crosses in or near the tomb; others, however, thought this implausible and purposely diverged from Eusebius in locating the discovery of the crosses at the site of the crucifixion.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HELENA LEGEND

It has been implied above that the legend surrounding Helena's discovery of the Cross originated in Jerusalem. Paulinus' version definitely had its origins in Jerusalem, while the accounts given by Ambrose and Gelasius were probably also based on information from Jerusalem. It is hardly surprising that the tale of how Helena found the Cross should have started here. Not only was Jerusalem the city where the event occurred, but the discovery of the Cross was also annually celebrated there, and the relics were preserved there. It is now time to investigate why and how the legend came into being, and, in particular why Helena, who originally had nothing to do with the Cross, was held responsible for its discovery.

At the end of the 340s, when Cyril of Jerusalem referred to the presence of the Cross and its veneration, and in 351, when he wrote his letter to Constantius about the appearance of a celestial cross, a great conflict between the sees of Jerusalem and Caesarea was in progress. This conflict concentrated on two issues: Arianism and the metropolitan primacy of the Bishop of Caesarea in the ecclesiastical province of Palestine.

Caesarea had become the metropolis of Palestine, not because it was an important city in Christian history, which it was not, but because it was a centre of provincial government.¹ Unlike Caesarea, Jerusalem was a city with a rich Christian history. Already from the second and third centuries on, pilgrims came to Jerusalem to visit the holy sites. The interest in Jerusalem shown by foreign visitors resulted in a growing awareness among the Christians in Jerusalem of the biblical tradition of their city. The consciousness that their city was a centre of the Christian world, motivated the faithful in Jerusalem to become interested in and study the history of their community. As a result of this growing consciousness of their Christian past, in the third century a list of successive bishops from earliest times was drawn up, which was

¹ Since 6 A.D. Judaea had belonged to the province of Syria and Caesarea was the procurator's residence. For centuries it was to remain the administrative and economic centre of Palestine. From early Christian times on, Caesarea had had a Christian community established by Philip, one of the Seven (Acts 8:40, 21:8); see L.I. Levine, 1975, 18-19, 24-26.

analogous to the lists of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch.² Much of the history of Jerusalem's Christian community in the second and third centuries is not known, but Jerusalem's position within the Church was apparently well established by the third century, when the bishops of Jerusalem played prominent roles at ecclesiastical councils.³ It seems that at the beginning of the fourth century the status of Jerusalem as a see was more or less equal to that of Caesarea.⁴ It is therefore not surprising that it was at this time that the conflict between both cities really developed, a conflict which had as object the primacy in Palestine.⁵ The conflict was aggravated by Jerusalem's position of esteem in the eyes of the Christian world. At the Council of Nicaea it was decided that henceforth at general councils the bishop of Jerusalem was to be the most honoured member after the bishops of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, while at the provincial councils of Palestine he was to remain subordinate to the Metropolitan of Caesarea.⁶ An extra dimension was lent to the conflict by the disagreement over Christian dogma. The bishops of Jerusalem adhered to the orthodox doctrine as formulated and decided on at the Council of Nicaea, whereas most of the bishops of Caesarea were favourable to Arianism. Even Eusebius had been briefly excommunicated by the Council of Antioch (at the beginning of 325) but soon renounced his error at the Nicaean Council.⁷ Eusebius' successor as Metropolitan was Acacius, a convinced follower of the Arian persuasion.⁸ In 346 we catch a glimpse of the conflict when

² C.H. Turner, 1900, 551-552.

³ E. Honigmann, 1950, 212.

⁴ C.H. Turner, 1900, 552: "... it is clear that a position of something like equality with Caesarea must have been a fait accompli at the beginning of the fourth century ...".

⁵ It is noteworthy in this respect that Eusebius never gave Jerusalem any special status and denied that Jerusalem was a holy city; see P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 107-108. The same author (*ibid.*, 277) also thinks that Eusebius employed Helena's visit to Palestine in his competition with Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem. The latter had clearly gained the upper hand in this competition because of the discovery of the Cross and his correspondence with Constantine.

⁶ J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova, et amplissima Collectio* II, 672. E. Honigmann, 1950, 212, n.10.

⁷ Although Eusebius was greatly admired for his writings, his attitude towards the Nicaean creed was not favourably regarded. Athanasius calls him an Arian and an enemy of the right creed (*Apologia Secunda* 77,10; 87,1 = Opitz, *Athanasius Werke* II 1, Berlin/Leipzig 1935, 157, 33ff.; 165, 36ff.). Epiphanius mentions Eusebius twice as an adherent of Arianism (*Haer.* 68 = *GCS* 37, 148, 15ff.; 149, 12ff.), as does Jerome (*Epist.* 84,2-3). In Byzantine times Eusebius was also considered to have been an Arian; see F. Winkelmann, 1964; R. Lane Fox, 1986, 653-654; T.D. Barnes, 1981, 213-214.

⁸ See for Acacius J.-M. Leroux, 1966.

Maximus, Macarius' successor as Bishop of Jerusalem, convened a council at which the bishops present unanimously condemned Arianism and sided with Athanasius of Alexandria, Arius' fiercest adversary, who seems to have attended this council.⁹

The conflict between the bishoprics of Jerusalem and Caesarea flared up openly in 349 when Cyril became bishop of Jerusalem.¹⁰ One of Cyril's aims was to promote Jerusalem and its see by underlining the importance of Jerusalem and its holy places for Christianity.¹¹ Soon after his ordination in 348, which was apparently preceded by many quarrels about the right creed,¹² he entered into an argument with Acacius about the interpretation of the seventh canon of the Nicaean Council. Cyril demanded the primacy in Palestine for Jerusalem by arguing that his bishopric was an apostolic see.¹³ At the same time the issue of Arianism also played a role in the conflict between both sees,¹⁴ as a result of which Cyril already in 357 and for a second time in 360, was deposed as bishop and exiled by synods dominated by Arians.¹⁵ In 361 Emperor Julian gave him permission to return from exile and to become bishop again.

In 366 Acacius died. Cyril immediately demanded the primacy for Jerusalem, by ordaining Philomenus bishop of Caesarea. However, Philomenus was expelled by Arian sympathizers, who in their turn made a certain Cyril their bishop. Thereupon the latter was deposed by Cyril of Jerusalem, who in 367 ordained his nephew Gelasius as bishop.¹⁶ In the same year uncle and nephew were sent into exile by Emperor Valens, who was an Arian

⁹ Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* II 24 = PG 67, 261. There may also have been regular conflicts between Macarius and Eusebius. The latter was of course alarmed by the growing status of Jerusalem; see Z. Rubin, 1982, 87-91.

¹⁰ See for Cyril *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, s.v. Cyrillus (2); E.J. Yarnold, 1981; J. Mader, 1891 (*non vidi*).

¹¹ P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 116-117.

¹² Jerome, *Chron. ann.* 349; Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 24.

¹³ Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* IV 25,2; Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* II 26,5-11; E. Honigsmann, 1950, 215. Cyril considered Jerusalem, and especially Golgotha, as "the very centre of the world" (*Catech.* 13,28); see P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 236.

¹⁴ Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* IV 25,2. Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* V 8 = PG 67, 576 and cf. Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* VII 7. Although Cyril was a fierce opponent of Arianism, he seems sometimes to have taken sides with the Arians, especially at the time of his dedication. However, his sermons do not betray any Arian sympathies, as the study of J. Lebon, 1924, 357-386, has made clear.

¹⁵ The sale of Church property to suppress a food shortage, was according to Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* IV 25,3, one of the accusations against Cyril.

¹⁶ Epiphanius, *Haer.* 73,37.

sympathizer.¹⁷ Only in 379, after Valens had died and Theodosius I had become emperor, did Cyril return to Jerusalem, where he held the episcopacy until his death on 18 March 386.¹⁸ Gelasius also returned to his bishopric after Valens' death.

It is likely that during the last years of his episcopacy Cyril in practice fulfilled the functions of Metropolitan, though his nephew Gelasius was formally the primary bishop of Palestine. However, Gelasius owed his bishopric to Cyril and was undoubtedly subordinate to his uncle. An indication of Cyril's actual supremacy is the list of participants at the Council of Constantinople in 381, at which both Cyril and Gelasius were present. In the list, which includes the bishops of Palestine, the name of Cyril figures at the top and Gelasius is mentioned second.¹⁹ E. Honigmann attributes this order to the seventh canon of the Council of Nicaea,²⁰ but it could well be that this order reflects the actual balance of power between both bishops. After Cyril had been succeeded by John (385-417), the Bishop of Caesarea became again the most powerful among his colleagues because of John's sympathy for the Origenist and Pelagian errors. Only during the episcopacy of Juvenalis (422-458) did Jerusalem permanently achieve metropolitan status in Palestine and did it become a patriarchate.

Though the sources unfortunately do not give clear insights, it is obvious from circumstantial evidence that there was a fierce conflict between Jerusalem and Caesarea in the fourth century. J. Vogt has demonstrated that Cyril's letter to Constantius II was one of the means employed in this conflict.²¹ Cyril was inspired to write the letter by a miraculous event which took place on 7th May 351: there appeared a luminous cross in the sky above Golgotha which extended as far as the Mount of Olives.²² The shining light filled the sky over Jerusalem for most of one day and everyone in Jerusalem is said to have observed this phenomenon. All inhabitants, Christian and non-Christian alike, flocked to the church and affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ. Cyril alleges that

¹⁷ Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* II 45 = PG 67, 361; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* IV 30,3; Epiphanius, *Haer.* 66,20.

¹⁸ Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* V 15 = PG 67, 604; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* VII 14,4.

¹⁹ C.H. Turner, 1914, 168.

²⁰ E. Honigmann, 1950, 215-216.

²¹ J. Vogt, 1949, 603: "... Cyrill (hat) seinen Brief an Constantius geschrieben, vor allem in der Absicht, diesen in seinem Streit mit Akacius für sich zu gewinnen." A recent edition of the letter with a critical apparatus was published by E. Bihain, 1973. The letter has also been translated into Armenian, Georgian and Syriac. For the Syriac version, see J.F. Coakley, 1984.

²² J. Vogt, 1949, 602-603, argues the event took place in 353.

immediately after the event he wrote to the emperor, because the manifestation, so the bishop argued, was conclusive proof of the divine support for his reign and for his campaigns against his enemies (an allusion to the war against the usurper Magnentius). The favours which God had endowed on his father were surpassed: whereas Constantine had been given a mere earthly sign, i.e. the relics of the Cross, Constantius was shown a sign from heaven. Even more important was that now Christ's prophecy in Matthew's Gospel, "and then will appear in heaven the sign that heralds the Son of Man" (Matth. 24:30), was fulfilled. Cyril's interpretation of the appearance of the celestial cross is eschatological. The cross announces the final return of God at the end of time. Cyril here compares the divine kingdom with the rule of Constantius. The letter ends with the wish that the emperor may be protected by God and that he may accomplish great deeds on behalf of the faith.

What objective was Cyril trying to achieve in sending this letter, apart from notifying the emperor of a strange natural phenomenon? In the first place the bishop was trying to establish a more intimate connection between the Christian emperor and the city of Jerusalem, its church and its bishop's see. For it was in Jerusalem that events from the remote Christian past, especially Christ's Passion and Resurrection had taken place, as well as events from the recent Christian past, i.e. the discovery of the Cross and its celestial appearance.²³ It is very noticeable that Cyril mentions the city Jerusalem as much as seven times in this letter, which is not very long.²⁴ Cyril also continuously emphasized in his homilies that Jerusalem was the city where the greatest events in the history of Christianity had taken place: Christ's ministry, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension.²⁵ The second objective of the letter is connected with the first one. When Cyril wrote his letter he was already engaged in his dispute with Acacius. By sending his letter to Constantius, Cyril tried to persuade the emperor to take sides with Jerusalem. By connecting the appearance of the celestial cross with Constantius, Cyril was able to confirm the emperor in his faith, to give him a unique proof of his piety and to promise him divine support. Of course Acacius had nothing to

²³ J. Vogt, 1949, 601: "Das besondere Anliegen des Briefschreibers besteht aber deutlich darin, dass er Jerusalem, die Kirche und den Bischofsstuhl dieser Stadt, dem Kaiser nahebringen will."

²⁴ E. Bihain, 1973, index.

²⁵ J. Vogt, 1949, 601, n.1; see also P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 35ff.

offer in reply to this. His city Caesarea possessed neither a Christian past nor relics of Christ's Cross. It is remarkable that in Cyril's letter there is no reference to the other famous celestial cross, which appeared to Constantine on the eve of his battle with Maxentius, and which was described by Eusebius.²⁶ In Vogt's opinion Cyril was deliberately reticent about Eusebius' description of the appearance of the celestial cross in 312, because he wanted to nullify this appearance in favour of the appearance in Jerusalem.²⁷ After all, Eusebius was Acacius' predecessor as bishop of Caesarea.

Cyril did not achieve his purpose. The emperor did not intervene in Jerusalem's favour in the conflict between the two bishoprics. Possibly the only result of the letter was the granting of Cyril's request to be judged by a more representative council after he was deposed in 357 by a council presided over by Acacius and attended by bishops who supported the Caesarean bishop.²⁸ However, unfortunately for Cyril, the outcome was the same.

For Cyril the Cross was special to Jerusalem and a vital part of his theology.²⁹ He referred to relics from it regularly in his *Catecheses* but he also employed the Cross, as in his letter to Constantius, as a weapon in his conflict with Caesarea.³⁰ The presence of the Cross in Jerusalem as a tangible testimony of Christ's Passion, which also reminded all who beheld it of the last weeks of Jesus' life, proved Jerusalem's importance and justified for Cyril the primacy of his city in the ecclesiastical province of Palestine. The importance of Jerusalem in the Christian world was implicitly confirmed by the great mass of pilgrims which in the fourth century travelled to Jerusalem to visit the holy places and to venerate the True Cross. In Cyril's time Jerusalem and the Cross became inextricably bound up with each other.

The special relationship between the Cross and Jerusalem was confirmed once more during the reign of Julian the Apostate. To undermine the Christian character of Jerusalem, Julian, at the beginning of 363, devised a plan to rebuild the temple which had lain in ruins since the days of Vespasian.³¹ Because the Jews also

²⁶ VC I 27-31.

²⁷ J. Vogt, 1949, 604: "... Cyrill [trat] in seinem Unternehmen in Wettbewerb mit dem Wunderbericht, den des Akacius Vorgänger Eusebius von Caesarea für den grossen Constantin geschrieben hatte. Dass das wunderbare Geschehen sich jetzt an der heiligen Stätte von Jerusalem ereignet hatte, liess er als einen Vorzug gegenüber der Kreuzesvision des Constantin bei Eusebius verstehen ...".

²⁸ Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* II 40 = PG 67, 344.

²⁹ P.W.L. Walker, 1990, 256-258.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 258-259.

³¹ A. Linder, 1976, 1034: "... the whole project was designed to defeat

considered the Christians their enemy, Julian considered them his natural allies. Furthermore, Julian as an advocate of sacrificial ceremonies, wanted to give the Jews the opportunity to sacrifice again, which according to Jewish law could only be done in the temple. A third reason for rebuilding the temple was to expose as false the prophecy of Jesus that not one stone of this Jewish sanctuary would remain standing.³² Refutation of this prophecy would be a considerable blow to the credibility of the Christian faith.³³ Alypius, a former *vicarius* in Britain, was appointed by Julian to supervise the rebuilding. However, things did not go according to the emperor's plan. Ammianus Marcellinus reports that, shortly after the restoration had begun, great balls of fire burst out near the foundation of the temple and burned the workers.³⁴ This misfortune and the untimely death of Julian in the Persian campaign resulted in the abandonment of all these plans.³⁵ This incident involving fire may well have been an earthquake. These are a common occurrence in this region. Strangely enough, Cyril of Jerusalem makes almost no reference at all to the rebuilding of the temple. There survives only a single remark about the destruction of the temple in his fifteenth Catechetical Lecture.³⁶ Shortly after Julian's reign the rebuilding project and its failure were fantastically described by Gregory of Nazianzus and also by Ephrem Syrus in one of his famous hymns against Julian.³⁷ Gregory's description of the failure of the rebuilding

Constantine's Jerusalem project by undermining its most ideological foundation—its exclusive character with regard to the Jews.” See for the rebuilding of the temple e.g. M. Adler, 1978; R. Browning, 1975, 176; M. Avi-Yonah, 1976, 185-204; G.W. Bowersock, 1978, 88-90, 120-122; G. Stemberger, 1987, 160-174.

³² Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:2; Luke 19:44. According to Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* III 20 = PG 67, 429, Cyril of Jerusalem seems to have considered the restoration of the temple as a test case for the Christian faith. If Jesus' prophecy turned out to be true, then Christianity would have shown itself stronger than Judaism.

³³ Julian's support of the Jews may also have had a military objective. He was on the verge of beginning his campaign against the Persians and it was therefore important that he could be sure of backing, or at least would not be hindered by any opposition, from the great number of Jews living in Mesopotamia; see M. Avi Yonah, 1976, 189.

³⁴ Amm. Marc. 23,1,3.

³⁵ M. Adler, 1978, 71-72, doubted whether the rebuilding had actually ever started. He thinks the restoration remained only a plan.

³⁶ *Cat.* XV, 15 = PG 33, 889; see also Ph. Wainwright, 1986, 290-291. There is, however, a letter in Syriac, allegedly by Cyril, on the subject of the rebuilding of the temple. It is dated to the early years of the fifth century and not considered genuine; see S.P. Brock, 1976 and S.P. Brock, 1977. Ph. Wainwright, 1986, has argued against Brock by alleging that the letter has to be considered genuine.

³⁷ Greg. Naz., *Or.* 5 = PG 35, 669; Ephrem Syrus, *Hymni contra Julianum* IV

project is of interest for the relationship between Jerusalem and the Cross, because another appearance of a celestial cross is mentioned. Gregory's account goes as follows. Soon after the Jews had begun rebuilding their temple, they were suddenly taken by surprise by an earthquake and storms, and were forced to leave the temple site. They wanted to take refuge in a nearby church, but the doors remained closed as if controlled by an invisible force. From the foundations of the temple fire burst out and fell upon the Jews, who tried by force to gain access to the church. As clear proof of the divine wrath, some were killed and others wounded. However, the greatest divine miracle was the appearance of a luminous cross in the sky above Jerusalem. Those who witnessed this miracle, could still show the sign of the cross which had then burned into their clothes, and whenever they—Christians and non-Christians—spoke afterwards about this miraculous event or heard an account of it, they noticed a luminous cross on their own body and the bodies of others. As a result of all this the restoration of the temple was abandoned and most of the Jews were converted. God, through his interference by means of earthquakes, storms, fire and, last of all, the celestial cross, saved Jerusalem for Christianity.³⁸

This account reveals once more the special link between Jerusalem and the Cross. It is therefore most probable that the legend about the discovery of the Cross also originated there. It is hard to say when exactly it came into being. Because there are no references to the legend of Helena's discovery of the Cross in Cyril's *Catecheses* and his letter to Constantius nor in other sources, it seems safest to date the origin and development of the legend

18-23 (ed. E. Beck, *CSCO* 78). Ephrem has a narrative similar to that of Gregory, though he leaves out the appearance of the cross. The story was also mentioned by the fifth-century church historians. See for Gregory's description of the appearance of the cross, J. Vogt, 1949, 595-596.

³⁸ This oration of Gregory gives expression to the conflict between Jews and Christians. For Christianity, the great danger of Julian's reign was not only the revival of the pagan cults, but also the open support for Judaism, which in the fourth century was still a powerful rival of Christianity. Whereas Constantine had devoted special attention to the conversion of Jerusalem into a Christian city through the demolition of pagan sanctuaries and the building of churches, Julian threatened to turn the clock back by admitting the Jews again to Jerusalem. Since Hadrian's time access had been forbidden to them by law, a law which fell into disuse for a time only to be reinforced by Constantine. Julian even gave the Jews the opportunity of restoring their faith to full glory by rebuilding the temple. Had Julian had lived longer his policy could have turned Jerusalem once again into a Jewish city, which would have been a severe blow to Christianity.

to the second half of the fourth century. It seems likely that it developed in phases and that preliminary versions of the legend circulated before it reached its final version, the one written down by Gelasius of Caesarea. These early versions probably existed at first only in oral form.³⁹ It could well be that the story originated among pilgrims who came to Jerusalem to take part in the celebrations of Holy Week, or to celebrate the annual dedication ceremonies in September. On both occasions the Cross was shown and present for all faithful to see and touch.⁴⁰ These pilgrims may well have wondered how the Cross had come to light again and as a consequence of this a narrative which eventually became the legend of Helena may have been invented.⁴¹ It is also more than possible that Christians belonging to the Jerusalem community invented the story to explain the presence of the Cross in the church on Golgotha and to support its authenticity.⁴² The argument for a Jerusalem origin of the legend is strengthened by the remark in the legend itself that the Cross was preserved in a silver shrine. From Egeria's itinerary we know that such a casket containing the relics of the Cross did indeed exist in the Constantinian basilica on Golgotha.⁴³ Even so, the role played by Macarius as well as Helena's invitation of holy virgins, who lived in great numbers in the Holy Land, to a banquet, speak in favour of Jerusalem as the place of origin of the legend.⁴⁴ This episode of the legend may again provide a date of origin for the legend as we know it. The invitation of the virgins is an anachronistic element in the story. In the latter half of the 320s, the time in which the legend is set, there were as yet no holy virgins settled in Jerusalem or the rest of Palestine. Things had changed by the second half of the fourth century. Holy virgins grew rapidly in number and many chose to make their new home at the holy sites in Palestine. In Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, they lived in a convent founded by Melania the Elder and Rufinus. In Bethlehem, too, Jerome and his spiritual companion Paula had set up a similar convent next to the Church of the Nativity.⁴⁵

³⁹ Cf. S. Heid, 1989, 62-63, who presumes that the legend of Helena was known almost from its origins in written form.

⁴⁰ *It. Egeriae* 37,1-3; 48.

⁴¹ S. Heid, 1989, 49-51.

⁴² T.D. Barnes, 1981, 382, n.130, thinks the story may have been invented by Gelasius of Caesarea or Cyril of Jerusalem.

⁴³ *It. Egeriae* 37,1.

⁴⁴ S. Heid, 1989, 44-47.

⁴⁵ Eusebius' allegation that the Constantinian basilicas on the Mount of Olives and in Bethlehem were founded by Helena (*VC* 43,1), made the connection

Helena probably played no part in the first oral versions. John Chrysostom presumably knew one of the earlier versions in which Helena was not yet included (see above p. 95). It is obvious that, although the Cross may very well have been found in the 320s, Helena had no part at all in its discovery. If she had played an active part in the finding of the holy wood, Cyril would certainly have mentioned this fact, if not in his *Catecheses* where he refers to the Cross, then definitely in his letter to Constantius. After all, it was by means of this letter that Cyril tried to establish close links between his bishopric and the imperial house, and nothing would have been more obvious than to refer to the fact that it was Helena, held in high esteem by her family not only during her life but also afterwards, who had discovered the Cross. That Cyril did not do this suggests that this version of the legend was in his time not yet in circulation: he simply did not know this account.

The first oral versions of the legend may have only related how and when the Cross was found, but not by whom. Helena was included in the legend when curiosity arose concerning the identity of those responsible for digging up the Cross.⁴⁶ Why Helena? Because she was a prominent member of the Constantinian dynasty, but chiefly because, thanks to Eusebius, she was known to have visited the holy sites in Palestine. Thanks again to Eusebius' presentation of her, she was remembered as a very devout Christian, who distributed gifts to the helpless and poor and to churches. She was even held responsible for the foundation of churches. The founding of the church on the Mount of Olives is attributed by Eusebius to the empress. Thus it was due to Eusebius that a connection was established between Helena and Jerusalem. The paragraphs about Helena follow immediately after Eusebius' extensive description of the establishment of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the basilica where the Cross was preserved. It was an easy step from there to connect Helena with the foundation of the Church on Golgotha, as had been done in the 380s⁴⁷ and eventually with the discovery of the Cross. A fusion and elaboration of the scattered facts about Helena which were in circulation could easily have taken place. Christ's Cross was present in Jerusalem. It is not known, however, who was responsible for the discovery. At this point Helena entered the

between Helena and the holy virgins easy for those who invented or augmented the legend.

⁴⁶ See also M. Sordi, 1990, 4-6.

⁴⁷ *It. Egeriae* 25,9.

legend, because she is known to have visited Jerusalem, is connected with the foundation of churches and is considered to have been very pious.⁴⁸ But although the legend related that it was Helena who found the Cross, it was significantly Jerusalem's bishop Macarius who was presented as responsible for the climax of the story, the actual identification of the True Cross. He has a crucial role in the legend. Without him the Cross would not have been recognized.⁴⁹

The smooth collaboration between Helena and Macarius in finding and identifying the Cross is noteworthy. In the period of origin of the legend, the second half of the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem was trying to win for Jerusalem and himself metropolitan rights in Palestine. The symbol of the cross was for him an important means of reaching his goal in this struggle, as his letter to Constantius makes clear. It seems at least possible that a story about the discovery of the Cross developed in Jerusalem, in order to explain the presence of the Cross and to support its authenticity, and that Helena and Macarius were afterwards included in the narrative as the principal characters on the initiative of Cyril. In this way, Christ's Cross became once again a means of connecting the imperial house, represented by Helena, with the bishopric of Jerusalem, with Macarius as its representative. The story of the discovery and identification of the Cross gave expression to the wish for harmonious cooperation between the imperial house and the Jerusalem bishopric. This alleged connection between emperor and bishop is also expressed by Helena's division of the Cross. The sending of part of the Cross to Constantine and the preservation of the other part in Jerusalem is a clear proof of the (wished-for) bond between the imperial throne and the see of Jerusalem. Moreover, through the sending of relics of the Cross, Jerusalem offers the emperors protection; evidently the Cross relics served as a *phylaktèrion*, as did the nails. But the legendary account in which the Augusta Helena found the Cross and sent relics of it together with the nails to the

⁴⁸ R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 87: "In der zweiten Hälfte des [4.] Jahrhunderts vermischt sich sodann die Erinnerung an die Wallfahrt Helena's nach Jerusalem und an die von ihr veranlassten Bauten in Bethlehem und auf dem Oelberge mit dem Gedächtnis an die Auffindung der Grabeshöhle und der Kreuzstätte durch Constantin. Die Auffindung des Kreuzes Christi wird also der Helena zugeschrieben."

⁴⁹ The fact that Macarius is left out in the versions of Ambrose, Paulinus and Sulpicius detracts nothing from the bishop's importance in the story. The three Latin authors probably did not mention him because he was unfamiliar to them.

emperor had a two-edged significance: on the one hand, the emperor is protected by the Cross, but on the other, the emperor is obliged to protect the Cross, i.e. the Christian faith. The discovery of the Cross by a member of the imperial dynasty and possession of relics of the Cross by the imperial house resulted in an inextricable bond between Christianity and the emperor. So long as the emperors adhere to the Christian faith, they will be protected by the power of the Cross, but as soon as an emperor becomes an apostate, as in the case of Julian, God punishes the incredulous and shows the Cross to be an ominous sign of his power. Undoubtedly the discovery of the Cross and the preservation of its relics made Jerusalem even more important as centre of the Christian world than it already was. Cyril exploited the Cross and by connecting the history of its discovery with the imperial house, he greatly added to the prestige of Jerusalem and undoubtedly scored a major point in his struggle with Caesarea for the primacy in Palestine. At the end of his life Cyril reached his goal: a bishop of Caesarea, in the person of his own nephew Gelasius, who deliberately placed himself in a subordinate position to his uncle in Jerusalem. Could it have been pure coincidence that it was the same Gelasius who, on Cyril's request, wrote his *Church History* and included the narrative about Helena's discovery of the Cross, a narrative in which Jerusalem and its bishop play such prominent roles?⁵⁰

Although the legend about Helena's finding of the Cross, which originated and developed in the second half of the fourth century in Jerusalem, is evidently historical fiction, by the end of the fourth century the narrative was accepted as historical and factual account. Despite the fact that the sources do not initially connect Helena with the Cross and its discovery, from the last years of the fourth century on it was considered an established fact that Helena had found the Cross.

⁵⁰ The collaboration between Helena and Macarius is also stressed by Z. Rubin, 1982, but with another goal in mind, namely to prove that the discovery of the Cross was the direct cause for building the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He calls Helena "Constantine's agent in the discovery of the Holy Sepulchre" (87). It is with Macarius at her side "as her guide and consultant, as an authority on the holy places in Jerusalem, and as a repository of tradition which only he as the bishop of Jerusalem, could transfer" (92), and most probably with his assistance (87) that Helena is supposed to have discovered the Cross. It might be that Macarius and Helena met when the latter visited Jerusalem, but Rubin is pushing things too far in implying that the discovery of the Cross by Helena was a historical event. There is no reason whatsoever to suppose Helena actually searched and found the Cross.

As the legend at first originated in Jerusalem, its tone was only mildly anti-pagan. The pagans were considered responsible for the covering of the site of Christ's passion and his tomb with the temple in honour of Venus/Aphrodite. The objective they here had in mind was to prevent Christians worshipping at this place. At the same time they hoped that the place would sink into oblivion as a Christian holy site. Rufinus calls the pagans "persecutors" of the faith and their temples "sacrilegious buildings".⁵¹ Socrates and Sozomen hold "people who wanted nothing to do with Christianity" responsible for covering Golgotha and the building of a temple at the place.⁵² Theodoret speaks about a "godless temple" built at the site of the Passion.⁵³ Paulinus of Nola characterizes the pagan cults as "godlessness" and as "godless superstition".⁵⁴ Sulpicius Severus mentions the pagan "idols" at Golgotha.⁵⁵

It is obvious that the authors of the legend accuse the pagans of hiding the Cross and of preventing Christians worshipping Christ at the place where he suffered, died and was buried. This attitude reflects the historical circumstances. It was the pagan emperor Hadrian who, after crushing the Bar Kochba rising, extended the city of Jerusalem, with the result that Golgotha came to lie within the city walls, and it was also he who decided to build a temple there. It might well be that the second-century Christian community of Jerusalem felt deprived of one of their principal sites of worship and considered the pagans in general responsible.⁵⁶

Resentment against the Jews can also be detected in the legend, although not in all texts. The texts of the church historians do not contain any anti-Jewish remarks. From this observation it may be inferred that the original Jerusalem version of the legend, that of Gelasius of Caesarea, was also not characterized by any sort of anti-Judaism, and that therefore the legend was not motivated at its inception by Jewish antagonism, despite the fact that the

⁵¹ *Hist. Eccl.* X 7.

⁵² Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = PG 67, 117; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,3.

⁵³ *Hist. Eccl.* I 18,2.

⁵⁴ *Epist.* 31,4.

⁵⁵ *Chron.* II 33.

⁵⁶ In the legend it is not Hadrian in particular but the pagans in general who are accused of covering Golgotha. The exception is Paulinus, *Epist.* 31,3, who remarks that Hadrian wanted to destroy Christianity by consecrating a pagan sanctuary on the place of the crucifixion. However, there is no reason to believe that Hadrian built the temple with the intention of desecrating this Christian site; see H.A. Drake *et al.*, 1980, 136-137.

discovery of the Cross provided an appropriate excuse for polemics against the Jews. However, anti-Judaism soon crept into the legend, especially into the texts of Paulinus, Sulpicius and Ambrose. Paulinus alleges that Helena in her search for the Cross, assembled "the most learned of the Jews to inform her of their native wickedness in which, poor men, they even boast."⁵⁷ Furthermore, Paulinus supposes that the Cross, if it had not lain hidden until the days of Helena, could have fallen into the hands of the Jews, in which case it would certainly have been smashed and burnt.⁵⁸ According to Sulpicius, it was the resistance of the Jews which prevented the Christians *in principio*, i.e. shortly after Christ's crucifixion, from consecrating and worshipping the Cross.⁵⁹ The most fervent anti-Jewish version of the legend is that of Ambrose. He contends that the Jews are ashamed and tormented because the discovered Cross is evidence that they had crucified Christ, whom they did not recognize as the Messiah. They thought they had defeated Christianity by killing Christ, but through the finding of the Cross and the nails, as a result of which Christ and Christianity had come to life again, they themselves were defeated.⁶⁰ Now, even the emperors recognize Christ and they have made themselves subservient to his power. Ambrose evidently presents Judaism as a force by its nature opposed to Christianity. At the same time he identifies Christianity with the imperial rule. The emperors recognize Christ and as a consequence they are the opponents of Judaism. Though he does not mention it, Ambrose is undoubtedly of the opinion that the emperors should combat Judaism and that the Church and the secular authorities should consider the ruin of Judaism their common cause.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Epist.* 31,5 (transl. P.G. Walsh, *Ancient Christian Writers* 36, 130).

⁵⁸ *Epist.* 31,3.

⁵⁹ *Chron.* II 34.

⁶⁰ Apart from employing the legend to polemize against the Jews, Ambrose uses the story to show that the heretical sects of the Photians and Arians are wrong (*De Ob. Theod.* 49).

⁶¹ This becomes apparent from the so-called Callinicum affair in 388. When it came to the notice of Theodosius I that the Bishop of Callinicum, a small town in Mesopotamia, and his followers had set fire to a synagogue, he ordered them to be punished for their misbehaviour and the synagogue to be restored at the bishop's personal expense. Ambrose, considering the destruction of a synagogue not a crime but a just act, was furious, and wrote to Theodosius that Christians should in no way support Jews and that a Christian was not allowed to punish his fellow believers for demolishing the testimonies of the Jewish superstition. See for this affair: Ambrose, *Epist.* 40, and e.g. J. Parkes, 1974, 166-168; A. Lippold, 1980², 42-43; M. Simon, 1986, 226-228; H. Schreckenberg, 1990, 304-305.

Unfortunately it is not possible to ascertain how the anti-Jewish remarks came to be inserted into the legend. Ambrose, who also in some of his other writings inveighed in a very aggressive way against the Jews and Judaism,⁶² might himself have seen the possibility of using the discovery of the Cross against them. In the case of Paulinus, and hence of Sulpicius, it seems not unlikely that Melania the Elder told him a version of the legend which already contained anti-Jewish elements. If that is so, it would mean that soon after the origin of the legend it gradually changed from a story invented to explain the presence of the True Cross in Jerusalem and to underline the special status of the Jerusalem bishopric, into a narrative which was particularly striking for its anti-Judaism. This anti-Jewish element was further elaborated in the Protonike- and Judas Cyriacus versions of the legend.

⁶² See H. Schreckenberg, 1990, 303-310.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PROTONIKE LEGEND

At the beginning of the fifth century two new versions of the legend of the Cross developed, both based on the Helena version and both of Syrian origin: the legend featuring Protonike (P) and that featuring Judas Cyriacus (C).

P presents an extraordinary version of the discovery of the Cross. The most authentic form known to us has come down in the Syriac *Doctrina Addai* (DA). This version relates how the Cross was discovered shortly after Christ's ascension, by Protonike, who was alleged to be the wife of the Emperor Claudius (41-54). In the *Doctrina* the legend is narrated by the apostle Addai to an audience consisting of Abgar, king of Edessa, his family and court retinue. While the legend which gives the main role to Helena is based on historical accounts (Eusebius) and on the historical circumstances of its time, P is a narrative which has no foundation in historical events. P was not known in Greek and Latin, but only in Syriac and later on in Armenian. The area of distribution of P was therefore confined to those eastern areas where Syriac (and Armenian) was spoken and understood.¹ Before going into P in more detail, I give here G. Howard's translation.²

But I will tell you that which happened and was done for people who, like you, believed in the Messiah that he is the Son of the living God. Protonice, the wife of Claudius Caesar, whom Tiberius had made second in his kingdom when he went to war against the Spaniards who had rebelled against him, this woman, when Simon one of the disciples was in the city of Rome, saw the signs and wonders and astonishing powers which he performed in the name of the Messiah [and] recanted the paganism of her fathers in which she lived, even the pagan idols which she worshiped. She believed in our Lord the Messiah, worshiped and glorified [him] along with those who were followers of Simon, and held him in great honor.

¹ Greek fragments on papyrus of the DA are known but no traces of P have been found on Greek papyri; see R. Peppermüller, 1971.

² G. Howard, 1981, 21-35 (Leningrad N.S. 4). For the manuscript tradition of P see BHO, 50-52; R.A. Lipsius, 1880; E. Nestle, 1889; V. Ryssel, 1895; J. Straubinger, 1912, 82-84; A. Desreumaux, 1983. Of the five published manuscripts of P, the sixth-century Leningrad manuscript N.S. 4 of the DA contains the most authentic version according to J. Straubinger, 1912, 84-86. It was first published by G. Phillips, 1876. See for a description of the manuscript, M. van Esbroeck, 1988.

Later she wished also to see Jerusalem and the places where the mighty deeds of our Lord had been performed. So she arose with zeal and went down from Rome to Jerusalem, she [f. 54a] and her two sons with her and her one virgin daughter.

When she entered Jerusalem, the city came out to meet her. They received her in great honor as due to the lady queen of the great country of the Romans. [As for] James, who was made leader and prefect over the church which was built for us there, when he heard why she had come there, he arose and went to her and entered in before her where she was dwelling in the great palace of the royal house of King Herod. When she saw him she received him with great joy, even as [she had received] Simon Peter. He also showed her healings and miracles like Simon.

She said to him: "Show me Golgotha where the Messiah was crucified, the wood of his cross on which he was hung by the Jews, and the grave where he was laid." James said to her: "These three things which your majesty wishes to see are under the authority of the Jews. They control them and do not permit us to go and pray there before Golgotha and the grave. They are not even willing to give us the wood of his cross. And not only this, but they persecute us that we not preach or proclaim in the name of the Messiah. Often [f. 54b] also they confine us in prison."

When she heard these things the queen immediately ordered that they bring before her Onias, the son of Hanan the priest, Gedalia, the son of Caiaphas, and Judah, the son of Ebed Shalom, chiefs and officers of the Jews. She said to them: "Deliver Golgotha, the grave, and the wood of the cross to James and to those who follow him. Let no man hinder them from offering service there according to the custom of their worship."

When she had thus ordered the priests, she arose to go and see those places, and to hand over the area to James and to those who were with him. Later when she entered the tomb she found within the tomb three crosses, one belonging to our Lord, and two to the brigands who were crucified with him on his right and left sides. In the moment that she entered the [f. 8a] tomb, she and her children with her, in that very instant, her virgin daughter fell down and died without pain, illness, or any cause of death. When the queen saw that her daughter had suddenly died, she kneeled and prayed within the tomb the following prayer: "The God who gave himself to death for all people, being crucified in this place and laid in his tomb, and who as God gives life to all, arose and brought many to life with him, whom the crucifying Jews will not hear as well as the erring pagans, whose idols, graven images, and pagan worship I have renounced. Now they will look on me with mockery and say: 'All this that has happened to her is because she renounced the gods whom she worshiped, acknowledged the Messiah whom she did not know, and went to honor the place of his tomb and crucifixion.' So if, my Lord, I am unworthy to be heard because I worshiped creatures instead of you, have regard for your august name, that it not be reviled in this place [f. 8b] as they have reviled you in your crucifixion."

While she was saying these things in her prayer and was relating [them] in the suffering of her crying out in front of all who were there, her oldest son came near and said to her: "Listen to what I have to say, your majesty. In my mind and reasoning I think that this sudden death of my sister was not in vain; it was rather a marvelous visitation by which God could be glorified—it did not happen that his name be blasphemed—in order that those who hear might believe. Look, we entered the tomb and found three crosses in it. We do not know which one of them is the cross upon which the Messiah was hung. By the death of my sister we are able to perceive and learn which cross is the Messiah's because the Messiah will not turn away from those who believe in and seek him."

Queen Protonice, although at that moment being very bitter inside, recognized that her son had spoken these things wisely, rightly, and straightforwardly. She took with her hands [f. 9a] one of the crosses and placed it upon the corpse of her daughter who was lying before her. Then she prayed: "O God, you who have demonstrated wondrous powers in this place in order that we might hear and believe, if this cross is yours, my Lord, and on it your humanity was hung by shameless men, show the strong and mighty power of your divinity which dwells in the humanity and let my daughter live and arise that your name might be glorified by her when her soul returns to her body. May those who crucified you be ashamed and may those who worship you rejoice." When she had waited a long while after she had said this, she took up the cross from the corpse of her daughter, put another one in place, and again prayed: "O God, by whose commands worlds and creatures exist, who takes pleasure in the lives of all people who turn to him and who does not turn away from the request of those who seek him, if this is your cross, my Lord, show the power of your victorious deeds as you are accustomed and let my daughter live and arise [f. 9b]. Let the pagans be ashamed who are worshipers of your creation rather than of you. May those who are true believers make confession that their mouth might be opened to praise you before those who deny you." After she had waited a long time she took the second cross from her daughter and taking the third cross placed it upon her daughter. When she attempted to raise her eyes to heaven and open her mouth in prayer, immediately, in that instant, in the twinkling of an eye, as the cross touched the corpse of her daughter, her daughter came back to life, suddenly arose, and glorified God who had restored her to life by his cross. Queen Protonice, when she saw how her daughter had come back to life was moved and greatly frightened. But though she was perturbed, she glorified the Messiah and believed concerning him, that he is the Son of the living God.

Her son said to her: "My lady, you have seen that if this had not occurred today, it might perhaps have happened that they would have left the cross of the Messiah, by which my sister came back to life [f. 10a], and would have taken and honored one belonging to the murderous robbers. Now behold, we have seen and rejoiced that the Messiah has been glorified by this which he has done."

She took the cross of the Messiah and gave it to James that it might be kept in great honor. She also gave orders that an especially great edifice be built over Golgotha where he was crucified and over the tomb where he was laid in order that these places might be honored and that there might be an appointed place for prayer and an assembly for worship.

When the queen saw all the people of the city who had gathered to the spectacle of this event, she commanded that without the veil of honor suited for queens, her daughter should go with her openly to the palace of the king where she was staying in order that all the people might see her and glorify God. Then the crowd of Jews and pagans who had been happy at the beginning of this affair and cheerful became very sad at the end of it. They would have been pleased if this [f. 10b] which they had seen had not happened, for because of it many had believed in the Messiah. Increasingly, they saw that the signs which had occurred by his name after his ascension were many times more than those which had occurred before his ascension. Moreover the news of this event which had happened travelled to distant places, even to my fellow apostles who were proclaiming the Messiah. So there was peace in the churches of Jerusalem and the cities around it. Those who had not seen this [event] with those who had seen it glorified God.

When the queen went up from Jerusalem to the city of Rome every city which she entered thronged together to catch a glimpse of her daughter. Upon entering Rome she related the things which had happened to Claudius Caesar. When Caesar heard it, he commanded all the Jews to leave the country of Italy, since in this whole region this event was spoken of by many. She also told Simon Peter [f. 11a] that which had happened.

Everything, therefore, which our fellow apostles were doing we preach to everyone in order that those who do not know might also hear the things the Messiah was doing openly by our hands in order that our Lord might be glorified by everyone. I have told you these things so that you might know and understand how great the faith of the Messiah is to those who truly follow him.

The *Doctrina Addai*, of which this translation is a part, originated and developed in the North Mesopotamian city of Edessa where Syriac was the native language. It is the official foundation legend of the Edessene church, and it gives an account of the introduction of Christianity to Edessa and the subsequent conversion of the Edessene King Abgar (4 B.C.-7 A.D.; 13 A.D.-50 A.D.), surnamed Ukkâmâ, and his city.³ Abgar, who suffered from an unspecified disease, heard of Jesus' miraculous healings and invited him to Edessa by means of a letter, which was delivered by Abgar's archivist Hanan. Once in Edessa he could not only cure Abgar but he would also be safe from the hostilities of the Jews. Jesus

³ Tacitus, *Annales* XII 12, mentions him as *rex Arabum Acbarus*.

rejected Abgar's proposition, answering that his task on earth had nearly been fulfilled. Instead of coming himself, he promised to send one of his disciples to Edessa after he had ascended to heaven. This reply of Jesus to Abgar, contained in a letter, was presented by Hanan to his king together with a portrait which he (Hanan) had painted of the Messiah. After Christ's ascension the Apostle Addai was sent to Edessa by Jesus' alleged twin brother Judas Thomas. He cured Abgar and during his presence at the court related the story about Protonike's discovery of the Cross. When Addai had finished his story, Abgar, his family and the others present, glorified God's name. Addai was permitted to preach his faith in Edessa. As a consequence Christianity spread rapidly among the inhabitants of Edessa and the surrounding countryside. Addai was made bishop and by the time of his death, the whole city had been converted.

The *DA* is obviously historical fiction. A correspondence between Jesus and Abgar cannot really have taken place, nor can there be any question, as early as the first century, of the conversion of an entire city. The first impetus for the composition of the *DA* is definitely to be dated later than the first century, but not later than c.300. Already at the beginning of the fourth century Eusebius refers in his *Church History* (I 13) to the correspondence between Jesus and Abgar and Addai's missionary activities in Edessa. Eusebius even included a Greek translation of the letters of Jesus and Abgar. He asserts that he had found the letters in the archives of Edessa and had translated them himself from the Syriac into Greek.⁴ Whereas the *DA* speaks about the apostle Addai, Eusebius, to whom this name was unfamiliar, identifies him as Thaddaeus, whom he reckons to be one of the seventy apostles.

The *DA*'s place of origin was Edessa and its development should probably be considered as a reaction to the spread of Manichaeism in the Mesopotamian area. In the second half of the third century Mani (216-c.276) preached his gnostic doctrine in this region. A certain Addai became one of his followers and was a most enthusiastic proclaimer of Manichaeism. Addai preached his creed in the desert of Syria-Mesopotamia. So apparently, there existed two apostles with the same name who tried in the same area to make converts for their respective religions: a Christian who,

⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* I 13, does not mention Hanan's portrait of Jesus. Perhaps this element was added to the *DA* only later; or perhaps Eusebius is deliberately reticent for dogmatic reasons: he disliked portraits of Jesus.

according to the *DA*, converted Edessa but is otherwise unknown in the sources, and a Manichaean who in the second half of the third century preached his faith in the Syrian-Mesopotamian desert. The occurrence in the same area of these two Addais of different religious convictions requires an explanation. A plausible explanation has been given by H.J.W. Drijvers. He thinks that the name of the Manichaean Addai was appropriated by the orthodox Christians of Edessa, who considered him a threat to their faith, in order to create an imaginary Christian apostle called Addai. The *DA* was composed around this non-existent Christian apostle at the end of the third century as a treatise of Christian propaganda directed against the preaching and missionary work of the Manichaean Addai.⁵ Addai's appearance in Edessa and the subsequent conversion of the city is situated in the first century in order to legitimize the Christian tradition of Edessa against the heresy of Manichaeism and to underline the fact that its Christianity went back to the time of Christ himself.⁶

As has been mentioned above, not only the *DA* but also Eusebius' *Church History* includes the correspondence between Jesus and Abgar and gives an account of Addai's arrival in Edessa, his preaching in the city and its subsequent conversion. It is, however, the most authentic, final version of the *DA* (the sixth-century Leningrad manuscript) which gives the fullest account, presenting the reader with many more narrative themes than Eusebius in his version. It is therefore generally supposed that, after the composition of the first version(s) of the *DA* at the end of the third century, the *DA* was extended by means of various additions until it reached its final form at the beginning of the fifth century. One of the main additions was the account of Protonike's discovery of the Cross.

⁵ H.J.W. Drijvers, 1983, 184-185: "Aufbau und Motive der Doctrina Addai sind am besten zu verstehen, wenn sie als eine christliche Propagandaschrift betrachtet wird, die die Rechtgläubigkeit und deren Ansprüche verbreiten will in einer historischen Situation in Edessa am Ende des dritten Jahrhunderts, die namentlich von der manichäischen Mission und der manichäischen Version des christlichen Glaubens beherrscht und gefährdet wurde." See also H.J.W. Drijvers, 1990, 391-393.

⁶ H.J.W. Drijvers, 1977, 896: "Die Abgar-Legende hat aber nur ein Ziel, nämlich zu zeigen, dass die Orthodoxie die ursprüngliche Form des Glaubens in Edessa war und auf Jesus selbst zurückgeführt werden kann, der dem Edessenischen König einen Brief sandte, worin Er ihm einiges versprach, u.a. die Verkündigung des wahren Glaubens. So wie die Apostel mit Gemeinden korrespondierten, korrespondiert in diesem Fall der Herr selbst mit dem König eines Kleinstaates in Mesopotamien, und darauf beruht der wahre Glaube, der in späteren Zeiten seine Rechte den Häretikern gegenüber behauptet."

Already more than a century ago R.A. Lipsius came to the conclusion that P was incorporated in the *DA* at a later stage. In the general context of the *DA* the story about the discovery of the Cross was considered rather peculiar. To Lipsius it disturbed the natural course and the coherence of the *DA*. Lipsius and other scholars after him therefore suggested that P had at first circulated independently before being added to the *DA*.⁷ Although the existence of several manuscripts which contain P as an independent story, completely separate from the *DA*,⁸ might argue in favour of this view, this suggestion is not very likely (see below p. 162). That P was added to the *DA* at a later date is confirmed by the absence of this episode from a London manuscript of the *DA* which dates at latest from the beginning of the fifth century, and which does not contain the story about Protonike's finding of the holy wood.⁹

There is general agreement that P was added to the *DA* either in c.400 or at the beginning of the fifth century.¹⁰ That would suggest a date of origin for P around the year 400.¹¹ It may be

⁷ R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 69: "Es ist klar, dass das ganze Stück [P] mit den Acten des Thaddäus nur in einem sehr äusserlichen Zusammenhang steht. Es hat wahrscheinlich schon als ein selbständiges Ganzes existirt, bevor es in die D.A. Aufnahme fand, und hier diejenigen lediglich formellen Aenderungen erfuhr, welche erforderlich waren, um die Erzählung dem Apostel Thaddäus in den Mund zu legen. Wirklich findet es sich in verschiedenen syrischen und armenischen Handschriften als selbständiges Stück."

⁸ See E. Nestle, 1889.

⁹ BL Add. 14654 fol. 33. See W. Cureton, 1967², 147.

¹⁰ M. van Esbroeck, 1979, 116: "Elle [P] a été intégrée à la Doctrine d'Addée, laquelle, dans son état actuel, date au plus tôt de la fin du IV^e siècle ...". L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 178: "Elle [P] remonte dès lors au moins au commencement de Ve siècle. C'est à cette époque ou dans la dernier tiers du siècle précédent qu'il faut placer l'origine." See also J. Straubinger, 1912, 94; A. Desreumaux, 1983, 184.

¹¹ The sentence at the beginning of P: "Claudius Caesar, whom Tiberius had made second in his kingdom when he went to war against the Spaniards who had rebelled against him", might speak in favour of this date. The denomination of an emperor second in rank, i.e. a Caesar subordinate to an Augustus, reflects the governmental situation at the end of the fourth century. In an unpublished paper entitled "The date of the *Teaching of Addai*", given at the Patristic Conference of 1983, T.D. Barnes attempted to establish a date of origin for the *DA* and thus for P on the basis of the allusion to the war in Spain. After the reign of Augustus, no serious wars forced the emperors to campaign in the Iberian peninsula until the invasion of Goths, Suevi and Vandals in 409. The Spanish war mentioned in P could, according to Barnes, only refer to the troubles created in Spain after the invasion and Constantius' military operations between 414 and 416 in this region of the empire (Orosius, *Hist. adv. pag.* VII 42,9ff.; Olympiodorus, frags. 20, 22, 26; Hydatius, *Chron.* 60). Therefore the *DA* and P should have been written well after the beginning of the fifth century. However, Barnes seems to be unaware that the *DA* underwent a development

inferred from the fact that P was composed in Syriac and was not known outside Syriac-speaking territories, except for neighbouring Armenia, that P's region of origin was Syria. Whether Edessa can be taken to have been the city where P was first composed is not certain, but the addition of P to the Edessene *DA* argues strongly in favour of this suggestion.¹²

Who is Protonike, said to be the wife of Claudius, and why is the discovery of the Cross ascribed to her? The Greek name Protonike is unique; it does not occur in any other ancient source. Moreover, it is known that Claudius had several wives but that none was called Protonike. It is therefore most likely that Protonike was a fictitious person and that her name had a symbolical meaning. At the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, scholars have tried to give an explanation of the name. Fruitless attempts have been made to connect the person of Protonike with women with similar names, like Berenice and Veronica. The name has also been interpreted as an expression of the Greek *ἐν τούτῳ νίκη*. In several manuscripts of later date the name is spelled 'Petronike', in which case it is understood to refer to the victory of the Apostle Peter. However, the most convincing explanation is provided by reading the name as *πρωτο νίκη*, meaning 'the first victory', which stands for the first discovery of the Cross.¹³

What can have been the motive for attributing the discovery of the Cross to an imaginary woman? The spread and popularity of the legend of the Cross in Syria, and especially in Edessa, has always been connected with Helena, Queen of Adiabene.¹⁴ Information about this Helena has come down to us through Flavius Josephus and Eusebius, who summarized Josephus' account about her in his *Church History*.¹⁵ The first-century Helena of Adiabene had together with her son Izates been converted to

which began at the end of the third century and that P was a later addition to the already existing *DA*. H.J.W. Drijvers, 1985, 93, also thinks that the remark about the troubles in Spain might indicate a date for P.

¹² J. Straubinger, 1912, 94: "Der Abfassungsort war Syrien ... Ob gerade Edessa als Abfassungsort anzusehen ist, lassen wir dahingestellt. Die Verknüpfung mit der Abgarsage spricht dafür." P had a long life in Syria considering the fact that at the end of the ninth century Moshe bar Kepha mentioned the legend in a homily about the Cross; see S.H. Griffith, 1986, 50, n.118.

¹³ See for the various explanations of the name Protonike, R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 92; L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 187; J. Straubinger, 1912, 98-100.

¹⁴ R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 86-87; L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 186-187; A.-M. Rouillon, 1908, 165-166; J. Straubinger, 1912, 100-101; J.B. Segal, 1970, 51, 68-69.

¹⁵ *Ant. Jud.* XX ii 2-5; *Hist. Eccl.* II 12.

Judaism. Driven by religious zeal, she undertook a journey to Jerusalem, which was then still Jewish. While she was there, Palestine was struck by a famine. Helena had corn transported from Egypt to Palestine at her own expense to alleviate the starvation among the Jews. This all took place during Claudius' reign. After Izates' death she returned to Adiabene, where she died shortly afterwards. Her body was transported to Palestine, where she was buried in a mausoleum just outside Jerusalem.¹⁶ At the end of the fourth century her tomb, consisting of three pyramids, was still a famous sight.¹⁷ Memory of Helena was preserved by her generous deeds and her famous mausoleum, not only in Palestine but also in fifth-century Mesopotamia. Moses of Chorene mentions her in his *Armenian History* (II 35), which work is dated by some to the fifth century. Moses connects Helena with the history of Edessa in a striking way. He reports that Helena, who converted to Christianity instead of to the Jewish faith, was the first wife of the Edessene king, Abgar Ukkâmâ.¹⁸ Thus it has been argued that there was a connection between Helena of Adiabene and Edessa. It has been inferred from this that the spread and popularity of the legend of the Cross in Syria, and especially in Edessa, is to be ascribed to a confusion of Helena Augusta with Helena of Adiabene.¹⁹ An additional argument for this alleged confusion is that, according to the *Actus Silvestri*, Helena Augusta like Queen Helena had been converted to Judaism before she became a Christian. Once the confusion had taken place, the name of Helena was inexplicably altered into Protonike, while the legend of the discovery of the Cross was pushed back to the first century because Helena of Adiabene had lived then.

Although there are striking similarities²⁰ between Helena of Adiabene and Helena Augusta—their conversion, their coming to Palestine, their care for those in need—there are no convincing

¹⁶ Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* XX iv 3.

¹⁷ Jerome, *Epist.* 108,9.

¹⁸ Moses incorrectly combines several facts. There were indeed political and religious contacts between Adiabene and Edessa (see H.J.W. Drijvers, 1966, 215; J.B. Segal, 1970, 12ff.; H.J.W. Drijvers, 1985, 90) but there is no question of a marriage between Helena and Abgar. A first-century Christian royal couple in Edessa came in handy for Moses because his native country Armenia was christianized from Edessa. A long tradition of Christianity in Edessa would show the Christian tradition in Armenia in a more favourable light.

¹⁹ J.B. Segal, 1970, 51: "But local [Edessene] legend confused this Helena with an earlier queen Helena, who was renowned for her adoption of Judaism ... and the latter was queen of Adiabene ...".

²⁰ These similarities were already noticed in the ninth century by Altman of Hautvillers, *ASS* Aug III, 18 Aug., 592.

reasons to explain their possible confusion. In fact, this supposed confusion raises more questions than it solves. What is the explanation for the sudden transformation of the name Helena into Protonike? Why was Protonike considered to be Claudius' wife when there had been no previous connection between Helena of Adiabene and Claudius apart from the fact that her conversion and her providing of food for the starving Jews had taken place during his reign? But a more serious argument against the confusion of both Helenas is the uncertainty surrounding the date of Moses of Chorene's *Armenian History*. This work should more probably be dated to the eighth century than to the fifth century,²¹ and therefore any connection between Helena of Adiabene and Edessa is not only a later invention of Moses of Chorene, but also an invention definitely later than the date of origin of the legend about Protonike's finding of the Cross. Nor can Helena Augusta's conversion to Judaism, as related in the *Actus Silvestri*, be used as an argument for a possible confusion between the two Helenas, not only because this document is a legendary source, but also because its date of origin is at least fifty years later than that of P.²² Thus, any explanation of the origin of P in Syria by reference to the confusion of Helena Augusta with Helena of Adiabene results in a needlessly complicated theory which also has no reliable foundation in the sources.²³ Fortunately, a more plausible explanation is available.

Around the turn of the century the question of whether P was dependent on the Helena legend (H), or H on P, was much discussed. In other words: which legend of the discovery of the Cross should be considered the original? Though it is today beyond doubt that H was the first and original version, about a century ago opinions on this differed. G. Phillips, who was the first to publish an edition of the *DA*, which was based on the sixth-century Leningrad manuscript, argued that P was earlier than H. But he believed, wrongly of course, that the *DA* already existed in its final form in c.300.²⁴ Lipsius, who published what is still a valuable comprehensive study of the genesis of the *DA*, and who was the first to propound the view that the *DA* came into

²¹ *Kl. Pauly* 3, 1438-1439.

²² The *Actus Silvestri* is dated in the second half of the fifth century; see W. Levison, 1924, 181.

²³ This confusion can even lead to totally incorrect conclusions, like those of J.B. Segal, 1970, 41, who argues that what is known about the life of Helena Augusta is largely modelled on the story about Helena of Adiabene.

²⁴ G. Phillips, 1876, IX.

being in stages, considered P a later addition, and concluded therefore that P was modelled on H. He thought that the legends had arisen more or less simultaneously, but that because of "innere Gründe", H should be considered to be of earlier date than P.²⁵ E. Nestle has no opinion, although he maintains H to be later than P, but by H Nestle means the Judas Cyriacus version (C) of the legend.²⁶ L.J. Tixeront joins Lipsius in thinking that H is of an earlier date than P.²⁷ J. Straubinger in his comprehensive study of the interdependence of H, P and C, concludes that P was modelled on H.²⁸ He argues that H was already known before 400,²⁹ whereas P in his opinion is to be dated after the turn of the century. The person of Helena was known in Syria—Straubinger refers here to the *Actus Silvestri* which he thought was of Syrian origin—and it was therefore only logical that P depended on H. All the more so because the legend about Protonike's discovery was totally unknown outside Syria. More important is Straubinger's opinion that P was a "Fortbildung" of H. Legends tend to develop and to become more miraculous and unlikely during their development. The more miracles and improbabilities in a story, the later it usually should be dated.³⁰ In Straubinger's view, P is less probable than H and is therefore of later date.

It is obvious that there is a relation between H and P. It is beyond question that H is of an earlier date than P and that the latter was composed in imitation of the former, as Lipsius, Tixeront and Straubinger concluded. However, since the rediscovery of Gelasius of Caesarea's *Church History*, their opinion that H came to Syria from the Latin West can be disproved. As discussed

²⁵ R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 91-92. It is interesting to note that Lipsius, who of course had no knowledge of Gelasius of Caesarea's *Church History*, thought the Latin versions of H (those of Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, Sulpicius Severus) to be the most original. The lively exchange of information between the churches of the Latin West and Syria was, according to Lipsius, the reason why H became known so soon in Syria.

²⁶ E. Nestle, 1895, 342. See also E. Nestle, 1880, 1529ff.

²⁷ L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 187: "Mais de ces deux récits quel est le plus ancien? Quel est le type primitif? Je crois, avec Monsieur Lipsius, que c'est celui qui regarde Hélène."

²⁸ J. Straubinger, 1912, 94-98.

²⁹ Straubinger refers here to the *De Ob. Theod.* of Ambrose. Like Lipsius, Straubinger, 1912, 78, also thought that H was of Latin origin: "... bei der bekannten Tatsache, dass H zuerst im Abendland auftrat und sich dort schon um 400 einer ansehnlichen Verbreitung erfreute und auch später dort die klassische Version geblieben ist, legt sich der Gedanke nahe, H sei im Abendland entstanden."

³⁰ J. Straubinger, 1912, 96: "Je mehr Mirakel und Unwahrscheinlichkeiten eine Legende aufweist, um so später ist sie gewöhnlich anzusetzen."

above, the Latin versions of H are secondary and have their source nearer to Syria than Lipsius, Tixeront and Straubinger would ever have suspected. Nor can Straubinger's view that H and P did not have a common source any longer be held.³¹ Contrary to what Straubinger thought, there does exist a common source from which both versions emerged, though this is not the written source which Straubinger probably meant. This common source is the city of Jerusalem. As I argued above (ch. 6), the legend of the discovery of the Cross (H) had its origin in Jerusalem. The legend became known in the western part of the empire by way of oral tradition. In the same way the legend must have reached Syria and Edessa.

In the second half of the fourth century, the period in which the legend about Helena's discovery of the Cross originated, close contacts existed between Jerusalem and Edessa. Many pilgrims not only visited Jerusalem and the other holy sites, but also paid a visit to the Syrian desert, domicile of many holy monks, and the Christian city of Edessa.³² Edessa was visited for the *Martyrium* of the apostle Judas Thomas, which was situated within the city's precincts, and on grounds of the supposed correspondence between Jesus and Abgar. Egeria was one of the many pilgrims who, in 383, travelled to Edessa.³³ Upon her arrival in the city she was received by the bishop, who took her on a tour of the principal sights. As the climax of her visit, he showed her the original letters of Jesus and Abgar which he even read out loud to her. As a souvenir of her visit, Egeria took copies of the letters back with her. Egeria's account of her stay in Edessa indicates that the city was visited regularly by pilgrims and she may be considered a representative of the many who came to this 'blessed' place.³⁴ It is highly probable that the legend was taken to Syria and Edessa by pilgrims, but possibly also by other travellers, who had become familiar with the legend of Helena's discovery of the Cross during their stay in Jerusalem. It is then only logical to suppose that the transmission of the legend took place in oral form.³⁵ What

³¹ J. Straubinger, 1912, 95: "Eine gemeinsame Quelle, aus der beiden geflossen wären, lässt sich nicht aufweisen."

³² J.B. Segal, 1970, 172ff.

³³ *It. Egeriae* 17-19. See also J.B. Segal, 1970, 176-178.

³⁴ *It. Egeriae* 17,2: "... no Christian who has achieved the journey to the holy places and Jerusalem misses also going on the pilgrimage to Edessa." (Transl. J. Wilkinson, 1981, 113.)

³⁵ Knowledge of the legend by way of a written source is not probable, although the possibility cannot be totally excluded. Syrian Christians were highly interested in the writings of Greek Christian authors. Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*

happened to the story about Helena's discovery of the Cross when it became known in Syria we do not know, but it is remarkable that the sources give no indication of H's circulation in Syria. Therefore H must have been transformed into P by the Syrians very soon after it became known.

The only reason for transforming the legend of Helena into the legend featuring Protonike was its insertion into the *DA*. It was necessary to adjust the story to the circumstances of the first century. The name of Helena could naturally not be retained and was therefore, for reasons that will be explained below, changed into Protonike. By setting the discovery of the Cross in the time of the Emperor Tiberius, necessary because the government of Abgar in the *DA* was associated chronologically with Tiberius' reign, an explanation had to be invented for a first-century Christian empress who travelled to Jerusalem and searched for the Cross. The most obvious explanation available for the empress' Christianity was found by the author(s) of P, whoever that/those may have been, in the preaching of Simon Peter in Rome. Through him the empress abjured paganism and became a zealous Christian. However, Simon Peter's missionary activities in Rome are connected with the reign of Claudius.³⁶ To solve the problem of chronology, the author(s) of P made Protonike Claudius' wife and Claudius in his turn was connected with Tiberius' reign by making him fellow emperor with Tiberius. The fact that Protonike was Claudius' wife, whereas Helena was Constantine's mother, seems a major change. However, probably already from the beginning of the fifth century onwards, Helena and Constantine were chiefly presented as an imperial couple, instead of as mother and son. Placing the finding of the Cross three centuries earlier, made adaptation of the original legend necessary. The episode of the demolition of the temple of Aphrodite naturally had to be left out, because this temple was only built in the second century. Bishop Macarius naturally had to be 'replaced' by a first-century colleague. His place was taken by James, who was supposed to have been the brother of Jesus, and who was traditionally regarded

was translated into Syriac; the earliest known manuscript dates from 411 and was produced in Edessa; see W. Wright, N. McClean, 1898. The writings of Cyril of Jerusalem were also translated into Syriac (see above p. 134, n. 21). However, it does not seem likely that the legend became known in Syria via Gelasius of Caesarea's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. His work, says Jerome in his *De Vir. Ill.* 140, was hardly circulated.

³⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 14.

as the first bishop of Jerusalem.³⁷ It would hardly have been credible, of course, if Golgotha and the site of Christ's tomb had been forgotten so soon after Christ's crucifixion, as H would have it. It was partly for this reason that the Jews were held responsible for refusing the Christians access to these places. By placing the empress' visit to Jerusalem in the first century, it became possible to make Herod's palace her temporary residence. There is a new element in P: the empress is accompanied by two of her sons and her daughter. The source for this element, if there was one, is not known.³⁸ The daughter has a leading role because of her sudden death for no apparent reason and her resurrection after the touch of the holy Cross. She obviously fulfills the part of the dying/dead woman/man mentioned by the authors of H. Also important is the part played by the eldest son. While James as bishop of Jerusalem might be expected to take over Macarius' role as it is described in H, it is in fact Protonike's eldest son who instead suggests to his mother the idea of combining an attempt to revive his sister with the identification of the True Cross. The prayer uttered by Macarius in H is taken over by Protonike herself in P. She prays not once but twice, while a third time is unnecessary because the touch of the Cross has already brought about the desired effect. Unlike his brother and sister, Protonike's youngest son has no role in the story.

Some of the differences between P and H are of course the result of the first-century setting of P, but the two versions also bear many resemblances. So many, in fact, that P's narrative is essentially the same as H:

- The empress travels to Jerusalem to visit the Christian places.
- She wants to see and visit Golgotha, the Cross and Christ's tomb.
- The empress discovers three crosses.³⁹
- The True Cross is identified by its power to resurrect a dead person.
- The Cross is given to the bishop of Jerusalem.
- A church is built on Golgotha.

An element omitted in P is the finding of the nails. There may have been two reasons behind this omission. First, the episode of

³⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 1.

³⁸ A parallel can be found in the *Actus Silvestri*, where it is said that Helena during her stay in the East was accompanied by her grandsons.

³⁹ Protonike discovers the crosses in Christ's tomb. According to Socrates (*Hist. Eccl.* X 1,17 = PG 67, 117), Helena had also found the crosses in the tomb.

the discovery of the nails seems initially not to have been an important element of the legend. Paulinus and Sulpicius Severus did not mention it either, while the other authors of H, apart from Ambrose, for whom the discovery of the nails is even more important than that of the Cross, gave it only a brief mention. Secondly, the discovery of the nails is often connected with the prophecy of Zechariah and the Christianity of the Roman emperors. Claudius was of course a pagan emperor who could not all of a sudden be turned into a Christian by the author(s) of P. Therefore it would not have been credible to have Protonike sent him the nails. The dispatch of part of the holy Cross to the emperor was also omitted in P for the same reason.

What can have been the motive for adding the legend to the *DA*? The answer to this is surely to be found in the anti-Jewish character of the legend.⁴⁰ The Jews and their leaders are held responsible for the inaccessibility of Golgotha, the tomb and the Cross. The Jews persecute the Christians and imprison them. The Jews are negatively designated as the crucifiers of Christ. The Jews (and pagans) who at first rejoiced at the sudden death of Protonike's daughter, become sad when the three wooden crosses are found and when the True Cross brings the girl back to life again, causing many conversions to Christianity. At the end of P Protonike tells her husband Claudius everything that has happened in Jerusalem; the emperor reacts by expelling all Jews from Italy.⁴¹

Although the direct stimulus for the composition of the *DA* was the success of Manichaeism in Syria, the original kernel of the *DA* also contained anti-Jewish elements which were augmented in the

⁴⁰ In my dissertation *Helena Augusta: Waarheid en Legende*, Groningen 1989, 163-168, I propounded the view that the insertion of P into the *DA* might have a connection with the original function of the *DA*, namely as a propaganda treatise against Manichaeism or gnosticism in general. I interpreted P also as directed against gnosticism. Writings of the second-century Christian apologists Justin and Irenaeus mention Simon Magus as the founder of gnosticism and a certain Helena as one of his adherents and companions (Justin, *Apol.* I 26; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 23; see for the gnostic Helena: *RAC*, s.v. Helena I (simonianisch) and J. Fossum, 1988²). My theory was that there existed a connection between this Helena and the principal person of P, i.e. Protonike, who was modelled on Helena Augusta. The valuable comments of Dr. G.J. Reinink have convinced me that this hypothesis is no longer tenable. At the time P was added to the *DA* gnosticism was no longer such an important issue in Edessa as it had been when the *DA* was first composed. However, Judaism certainly was.

⁴¹ Cf. Suetonius, *Claudius* 25,4.; Acts 18:2; and Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 18, where it is stated that Claudius banished the Jews from Rome. Although Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome and possibly the whole Italian peninsula, his general attitude towards the Jews was not antagonistic; see E.M. Smallwood, 1981, 210-216, 246-250.

course of its development.⁴² The *DA* is characterized in general by a strong tendency to anti-Judaism. Apart from the passages in *P*, there are many other anti-Jewish comments. Edessa's King Abgar in particular is pictured as somebody who hated the Jews. In a letter he advised Tiberius to take legal action against the Jews in order to punish them for the crucifixion of Christ. He is delighted when it comes to his notice that Tiberius has had several Jewish leaders executed.⁴³ In his dying hour the apostle Addai warns those who are standing by him to beware of the crucifiers (i.e. the Jews), and not to befriend them because their hands are tainted with the blood of the Messiah.⁴⁴ The same passage also tells that by denying Christ the Jews rise up against the words of their own prophets.⁴⁵ This anti-Judaism in the *DA* definitely reflects the actual situation in Edessa, where Jews formed a considerable part of the population. Judaism, as an old and traditional religion, was considered a threat to Christianity by the Church leaders and theologians.⁴⁶ It is more than likely that when the legend of the discovery of the Cross became known in Syria its potentially anti-Jewish character was noticed. It may even be the case that anti-Jewish elements had already crept into it by the time the legend became known in Syria. Some Latin versions of *H*, written down at approximately the same time as *P* was composed, also contain several anti-Jewish remarks.⁴⁷ Its potential anti-Judaism made the legend very apt for insertion into the *DA*, which as a genuine piece of propaganda proclaims the true Christian belief and polemizes against all those who are of a different opinion, including the Jews. Thus the story was transformed and adapted in such a way that its character came to match that of the *DA* in general and it could easily be added to it.

The chronological adaptation, however, raised a problem. Now not only two stories about the discovery of the Cross existed, but also two discoveries: one situated in the fourth century, with Helena Augusta as the main character and the other in the first century with Protonike playing the leading role. The name

⁴² H.J.W. Drijvers, 1985, 92ff.

⁴³ *DA* f.5a = Howard 13; *DA* f.23b-f.25a = Howard 75-81.

⁴⁴ *DA* f.27a = Howard 87. Other anti-Jewish remarks in the *DA*: f.2a = Howard 5; f.3a = Howard 9; f.26b = Howard 85; f.30a = Howard 97.

⁴⁵ This is an anti-Jewish remark which recurs frequently in Christian writings; see e.g. Jerome, *Epist.* 53,4; Joh. Chrys., *Adv. Iud.* I 5 = *PG* 48, 850.

⁴⁶ See H.J.W. Drijvers, 1985, for Jews and Christians at Edessa.

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De Ob. Theod.* 49; Paulinus of Nola, *Epist.* 31,3; 31,5; Sulpicius Severus, *Chron.* II 34.

Protonike becomes clearer in the light of this. While Helena brought victory to Christianity by finding the Cross in the fourth century, it was another empress three centuries before her who had *first* found the Cross. Hence her name Protonike, 'First Victory'.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE JUDAS CYRIACUS LEGEND

The existence in Syria of a legend about the first discovery of the Cross also demanded the invention of a story about a second discovery. The Helena legend, which was known outside Syria as the one and only account of the discovery, was simply inadequate for this. And so it was that a third version, the Judas Cyriacus version (C), came into being.

Of all three versions of the legend, the Judas Cyriacus version became the most popular and the one with the greatest area of distribution. Its popularity may be due to its anti-Jewish character. In the Middle Ages in particular it was a story much loved throughout Europe and was translated into many vernacular languages.¹ But the earliest versions are in Syriac, Greek and Latin. Some of these are published, others are only known in manuscript.² The text below is translated from the Syriac manuscript BL Add. 14644, which dates from the fifth or sixth century, and may be considered the most authentic text available.³

The story of how the wood of the Cross which was found in Jerusalem, was found for the second time in the days of the blessed queen Helena, mother of the victorious and godloving Constantine, the Christian emperor.

In the year 351 in the reign of the godloving Constantine the holy and lifegiving grace of the Holy Spirit deemed the believing Helena, mother of this Constantine, worthy of a great and excellent gift. For she was a woman who was instructed in all Holy Scriptures and love for Our Lord Jesus Christ was found with her. And in accordance with this diligence she took great trouble to trace and

¹ E.g. Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea, De Inventione Sanctae Crucis*, Th. Graesse (ed.), 1890, 303-311; F. Holthausen, 1905.

² For texts of the Cyriacus legend, see *BHO* III, 3rd ed., Fr. Halkin, Brussels, 1957, Appendix I, 81-87; *BHL* I, 619-621; *BHL*, novum suppl., Brussels, 1986, 454ff.; J. Straubinger, 1912, 4-7. In the Occident the best known text of C is the one pulshed in *ASS*, Mai 1, 450-452; see also B. Mombritius, 1910, vol.1, 376-379.

³ For the date, see W. Wright, 1872, 1083; A. Desreumaux, 1983, 183. The manuscript was first published and translated into German by E. Nestle, 1889, 25-36, 55-64. The Leningrad manuscript N.S. 4 also contains a Syriac version of C. According to M. van Esbroeck, 1988, 215, this text may be of slightly earlier date than that of BL Add. 14644. Unfortunately, however, the Leningrad text of C has not yet been published. The translation of the text presented here keeps closely to the Syriac.

find the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ. For after she had learnt about the Incarnation of Our Lord and how He was hung on the wood and had risen from the dead on the third day,⁴ she did not desist from this until she had found it. Thus the believing one went to and arrived at Jerusalem in glory and with a large army on the 28th of the month Iyar. And she made a large assembly from the inhabitants of the city and from the Jews who were there. Not only those that were in the city she ordered to assemble, but also those that were outside it in the towns and villages. For Jerusalem was almost laid waste in that time and not more than 3,000 Jewish people were found there. And when they had assembled, the queen said to them: "I have learnt from the Holy Scriptures that you were of old the beloved of God. Because you rejected all knowledge of the Scriptures and reviled Him who wanted to save you from the curses of the Law and showed with saliva contempt for Him who through His saliva opened the eyes of the blind,⁵ and because you regarded the light of truth darkness and falsehood, these curses that are written in your Law came over you. Assemble therefore for me people from your midst who have detailed knowledge of the Law, so that they shall teach me about everything I ask them." Then they went away from her with great fear and searched out from their midst people who knew the Law, about 1,000, and they brought them before the queen. And the queen spoke and said to them: "Listen to my words and give ear to my sayings for you did not understand the words of the prophets as they prophesied before about the coming of Our Lord. Because of this I am going to interrogate you. For the blessed David said: 'I put the Lord always in front of me and He was at my right hand so that I should not quiver'.⁶ And the holy Isaiah said: 'I raised and exalted children and they sinned against me and an ox knows his owner and an ass the manger of his master, but my people did not know me and Israël did not recognize me.'⁷ And all Scriptures spoke about the Messiah too. Because you were instructed in the Law, search out now for me again today people that truly are well acquainted with the Law so that I can interrogate them and they will answer me." The blessed Helena now gave orders that the Romans should guard them in order that they should not flee anywhere before they had given an answer. They consulted with each other and chose again out of their midst about 500 people and they came and stood in front of her. And she asked: "Who are these". And they said: "People who have detailed knowledge of the Law." And she began to teach them, saying: "You are really fools, sons of Israël, as Scripture says, who follow the blindness of your ancestors, those murderers, who said that Christ is not God. You, who read in the Law and in the Prophets, and you do not understand." Then they said: "We read and we understand. What are these words that you

⁴ Matthew 27:62, 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6-7.

⁵ Mark 8:23-25; John 9:6-7.

⁶ Ps. 16:8; Acts 2:25.

⁷ Isaiah 1:2-3.

speak to us, mistress. Speak clearly to us and let us know in order that we too answer your majesty according to our capacity." And she said to them: "Go again and choose people who are great experts in the meaning of the Law." They, when they went, said to each other: "For what reason does the queen impose this great trouble upon us?" One of them, whose name was Judas, said to them: "I do know and I think that she is using us to make an inquiry about the wood on which our forefathers crucified Jesus. But make sure that if one of us knows it, he does not confess. And if he does, all feasts of our forefathers will cease and the Law will be abolished too. For Zachaeus, the father of my father, ordered my father when he was dying, and my father in his turn when he was dying [f.19^v] ordered me, saying to me: Beware, my son, when the wood on which our forefathers hung Jesus is sought after, if it happens that those people who before also had searched for it and said 'where is it' and they will also ask you, tell it before you are tortured. Because this nation of the Jews will not reign again but from henceforth the victory will belong to the worshippers of Christ and He will reign for ever and ever. For He is king, the son of the living God. And I said to him: Father, if our forefathers had known that he is the Messiah, why did they stretch out their hands towards him? And he answered and said to me: Listen to me, my son. As our forefathers said, they were never accomplices of the crucifiers but even stood up against the elders and the scribes of the nation who knew that He was the Messiah. And He too, Jesus, rebuked them continuously and they in their envy condemned Him and killed Him, who did not die, and they brought Him down from the Cross and buried Him. And after three days He rose and showed Himself to His disciples.⁸ Because of this Stephen, the brother of the father of my father,⁹ believed and began to teach in His name. And the Pharisees and Sadducees gathered against him, convicted him and stoned him.¹⁰ And he, the blessed one, when he was about to give up his soul he beheld the heaven and prayed and said: 'Lord, do not impute this sin to them.' Listen now to me, my son, and I shall teach you the mercy of Jesus. Saul, too, who was on the side of the Temple and who worked in the trade of the tentmakers, he also persecuted all believers in Christ and gathered a large multitude against our brother [f.20^v] Stephen when he was stoned. And Christ showed him mercy and brought him towards Him and made him His disciple.¹¹ Therefore, my son, as my forefathers ordered me I believed in truth that He is the Son of God. And you, my son, do not revile Him and do not despise those who believe in Him; and you will have eternal life. If now, in your days the Cross is searched for, show it and if not, give orders to your sons. My father Simon ordered me this and look, you heard it. What do you think? If she

⁸ Luke 24; John 20-21; Mark 16; Matthew 28.

⁹ For the genealogy of Judas' family, which varies in the various manuscripts, see J. Straubinger, 1912, 54-55.

¹⁰ Acts 6-7.

¹¹ Acts 9:1-19.

asks us, what answer will we give her concerning the wood of the Cross?" And they answered and said to him: "We never heard these words that we heard from you today. And now we say to you, if the wood of the Cross is searched for do not show it if you know it. For indeed from your words you also know where it is." And when they secretly discussed these things among themselves, other Romans came after them and said: "The queen seeks for you." And they brought them. And when she had discussed many things with them and she had asked them and they could not answer her, she ordered them to be delivered to the fire. They, however, since they were afraid, handed one of them over to her, whose name was Judas, saying: "This man is the son of a just man and a prophet and he is more than anyone else versed in the Law and he will teach you everything you ask him." And when the Jews had given this testimony of him, she sent them away from her and she retained only Judas and called him and said to him: "Which of these two things do you choose [f.20'] for yourself; either someone will place a good and gracious life in front of you or death with severe torments." Judas said: "Who in the desert would desire to eat stones when he can get bread?"¹² The queen said: "If you want to have life in heaven and on earth, tell me where the wood of the Cross is to be found and where it was hidden by you." Judas said: "As it is written in the official acts." She then said: "Show it to me." Judas said: "Many years have passed since that time, about 200 or 300, and we are young men nowadays and how can we know these things?" The queen said: "And what about the Trojan war that happened many generations ago and what about Ilion whom everybody recalls so that they even can show his tomb to the people that dwelled there." Judas said: "It is clear that they knew these things from records; we, however, do not have these." The queen said: "How many times does it occur that even ignorant people are acquainted with great things; you, however, even shortly before asserted me that there are official acts." Judas said: "I said it, mistress, by way of supposition." The queen said: "I learned from the Holy Gospel that He was crucified at a place called Golgotha."¹³ You show me where this place is and I shall search it; I have confidence that I shall find it [the Cross] and my desire will be fulfilled." Judas said: "I do not know the place, mistress, because I also was not born [here]." The queen said: "I swear by Christ, who was crucified, that I shall torture you with hunger and thirst if you do not tell the truth." And when she had said these things, she ordered Judas to be thrown into a dry well for seven days [f.21'] and that he should stay there without food. And when seven days had passed Judas screamed from the well and said: "I beg you, bring me up from this well and I will show you the place where the Cross of Christ is hidden." And when he had ascended from the well, he went to that place and he called with a loud voice in

¹² Cf. Matthew 15:33; Matthew 7:9.

¹³ The literal Syriac is "skull". Cf. Matthew 27:33, Mark 15:22 and Luke 23:33 in the Peshitta version.

Hebrew, saying as follows: "Oh God, who made the earth and measured the heaven with His span and who meted with the hollow of His hand the dust of the earth,¹⁴ God, who sits on the chariot of the Cherubs who fly in the air¹⁵ and dwells in the glorious, immeasurable light whither one of the children of men cannot ascend, God, who made the countless Seraphs for His service and who continuously praise Him with their voices, saying 'holy, holy, holy, mighty Lord whose glory fills the earth',¹⁶ you are the Lord of the Universe because everything is the work of your hands. And now, Lord, if this is your will that the son of Mary will reign, He whose being is derived from you because if His being were not derived from you, He would not have performed these mighty deeds and He would not have risen from the dead after three days. Now, Lord, I beg you, too, perform this miracle for me and just as you showed the bones of Joseph to Moses,¹⁷ show thus also to us the excellent treasure, the wood of your Cross. And if it is buried in this place, may the sweet smell of incense ascend from it, and I too shall believe in Christ who was crucified, He who will reign for ever and ever." After Judas had prayed, there was immediately a loud voice at that place and a strong smell of excellent incense exhaled from this place so that Judas was enlightened while he clapped his hands, praised, confessed, and said [f.21^v]: "Truly, you are Christ, the Saviour of the Universe. I thank you, Lord, because although I do not deserve it, you have not deprived me of your grace. I beg you, Lord, do not remember my sins against me but lead me to the blessed Stephen, my brother, he, who is triumphant today together with the twelve blessed apostles, your servants." And when he had said this, he girded his loins manfully and took an axe in his hand. When he had dug about twenty ells he found three crosses that were hidden and he brought them into the city to the queen. And the queen asked him: "Which of these is the one on which Christ was crucified. For I know that two of them are those of the robbers who were crucified together with him." And he put them in the middle of the city and they waited in order to see the glory of Christ. And at the time of the ninth hour a dead person passed by (while they carried him) on a bier, and this dead person was a youth. Judas then said: "Now, mistress, we can learn which is truly the Cross on which Our Lord was crucified and you can perceive his power." And Judas seized the bier and placed two crosses upon it and this dead person did not rise. And when he had placed the third one, on which Our Lord was crucified, this dead person immediately rose. And all people that stood there were amazed and glorified God for what they had seen. Then a demon screamed in a man who belonged to Satan, who used to be jealous of beautiful things, and he cried out and said: "Who is this Jesus who did not allow me to receive the souls. Oh, you, Jesus, who drew the whole

¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 14:12.

¹⁵ Cf. Ezekiel 1:1ff.

¹⁶ Isaiah 6:2-3.

¹⁷ Exodus 13:19.

world towards you, why did you reveal again your Cross to Judas that he should be my opponent? Oh Judas, what have you done? Through the first Judas I effected betrayal [f.22^v] and caused the world to sin. Now, however, I am being persecuted by the second Judas. I have found out a device which I will use against you. Now I shall go to another king who will rule to ruin the name of Him who was crucified¹⁸ and he will follow me and submit you to many tortures¹⁹ and then you will renounce Him, who was crucified, in whom you have believed up to the present." Judas became angry and resisted this demon and said: "May Christ, who raised the dead,²⁰ rebuke you." And immediately this man found rest from his demon. And when the blessed Helena had seen what Our Lord had done through Judas, she was amazed by his faith. And Helena kept the venerable Cross with great care and mounted it in pure gold and precious stones and she made a silver shrine for it and placed it in it. And she built a church at that place which is called Golgotha. And Judas immediately received the incorruptible baptism in Christ and he became a believer by the signs that Christ had performed through him. Then she, the believing woman, entrusted Judas to the bishop who was there at that time in Jerusalem because he also had baptized him. And when the local bishop had died, the queen spoke to the blessed Eusebius, Bishop of Rome, who was with her and he laid hands upon Judas and made him bishop there in Jerusalem. And she also changed his name and called him Cyriacus.

And after these things had happened, because she was truly full of belief and instructed in the two testaments of the Holy Scriptures, the queen furthermore took care to search also for the nails that had been hammered in the Cross. And she again called the blessed Cyriacus, whose name was Judas before, and said to him: "Now that my wish has been fulfilled concerning the wood of the Cross, I also want very much to get possession of the nails that were driven into His hands and feet. And I shall not cease and my heart will have no rest until Christ also will fulfill this desire. But pray again and I believe that Our Lord will also show you this." Immediately the blessed one stood up and together with many brethren and believers went to that place where the Cross had been found and where they had seen that miracle which occurred when the Cross was found, namely how it brought a dead person back to life. And when he had arrived there, he smote his breast and lifted his eyes towards heaven and called upon God, saying: "I give thanks to you, my Lord, that you have delivered me from the ignorance of the Jews and I praise those who already believe in you and all those who will believe in you." And he prayed for a long time and waited to see a sign such as he had seen when the wood of the Cross was found. And at the end of his prayer when he said 'amen', a sign again appeared like the first one which we all saw when we were assembled. For a powerful and strong flash of lightning

¹⁸ A reference to the reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363).

¹⁹ A reference to Judas' martyrdom in the time of Julian's reign.

²⁰ Cf. John 11:38-44.

suddenly shone forth from heaven at that very place of the Cross so that it overcame the light of the [f.23^v] sun. And those nails manifested themselves from the earth like shining pure gold, so that everybody who saw this believed and said: "Now we know that Jesus, who was crucified, is God." And this blessed bishop Cyriacus in a worthy manner took the nails and brought them to the believing Helena. And when she saw them, she kneeled before them and worshipped. And since she was full of belief, she praised Christ Our Lord and considered what she would do with these nails. And, as before, the grace of the Holy Spirit again enlightened her mind and suggested to her the idea of making something out of them that would provide good testimony for future generations. And she planned to make what the prophet had prophesied before and she sent for a believing man, a skilled craftsman, of whom many had testified. And she said to him: "Keep the king's order and carry out the mystery of the king and take these nails and make from them bridles for the horse of the king so that it will be an invincible weapon for him against all his enemies because now the victory belongs to the king and he will have peace instead of war. In this way the saying of the prophet Zechariah will be fulfilled, who said: It will happen on that day that the bridle of the horse will be called holiness unto the Lord."²¹

Thus the blessed one enlarged belief in Our Lord in Jerusalem. And when she had accomplished all these things, she immediately stirred up a large persecution against the nation of the Jews and gave orders that they should be expelled from Judaea. And great grace was [f.23^a] given by God to bishop Cyriacus so that he also chased away the host of demons through his prayer and cured every pain and illness. Then the queen presented many gifts in Jerusalem and left them to the bishop for the support of the poor. And she left with great honour and in peace and ordered all the believers in Christ, men and women, to celebrate the commemoration of the finding of the Cross every year as long as they lived. And all who know the Cross and commemorate it will be a part of the blessed Mary,²² the mother of God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Finished is the official record of how the wood of the Cross of Our Lord was found for the second time in Jerusalem by the exhortation of the faithful Helena in the days of the Christian Constantine, the victorious king.

Like the Protonike legend, this version of the legend was also the object of scholarly study at the end of the last century. The final result of these studies was presented by J. Straubinger in his book *Die Kreuzauffindungslegende*. With regard to C, Straubinger's study is still authoritative and his "Gesamtresultat" cannot be challenged

²¹ Zech. 14:20.

²² The literal translation is: "they will have a portion (a part) with the blessed Mary".

here, although on minor points his conclusions need some correction.²³

Straubinger concentrated at first on the problem of language: was C originally written in Syriac, Greek or Latin? This question had become topical after A. Holder published a Latin version of C in 1889, supposing that this version went back to an as yet unknown Greek text.²⁴ In 1891 K. Wotke thought he had discovered this Greek manuscript.²⁵ However, Straubinger noticed too many differences between Holder's Latin text and Wotke's alleged Greek original and as a result he started to compare all available, i.e. published, texts of C.²⁶ Unlike Wotke, he also included in his comparison Syriac texts of C, which had become accessible through the work of E. Nestle.²⁷ He came to the conclusion that the oldest Syriac text of C must have been the one contained in BL Add. 14644, published by Nestle (the above translated text). The oldest Greek version of C was transmitted in an eighth- or ninth-century manuscript, which was also published by Nestle.²⁸ In comparing the Latin texts Straubinger noted only minor differences between them, so that in this case he simply chose the oldest manuscript, Cod. Par. 2769, which was dated to the sixth/seventh century and published by Holder in 1889. Having established the original manuscript in each of the three languages, it became obvious to Straubinger that none of the Greek texts could have served as the one from which the Latin C was derived, as Wotke had alleged. Nor could any of the known Syriac texts.²⁹ However, it was clear to Straubinger that the Syriac C was textually much closer to the Latin C than any of the Greek Cs. Therefore Straubinger considered it possible, but not certain, that the Latin C might have been directly derived from the Syriac C.³⁰

²³ J. Straubinger, 1912, 108, appears to have been convinced of the correctness of his results as is evident from the last sentence of his book: "Einzelne untergeordnete Resultate mögen vielleicht mit der Zeit eine andere Formulierung erfahren, das Gesamtergebnis wird schwerlich eine Änderung erleben."

²⁴ A. Holder, 1889, X: "Narrationem Latinis codicibus traditam e GRAECO sermone versam esse scribendi color manifesto arguit. Genuinus textus in bybliothecis latere videtur."

²⁵ K. Wotke, 1891.

²⁶ J. Straubinger, 1912, 7-14.

²⁷ E. Nestle, 1889.

²⁸ E. Nestle, 1895.

²⁹ J. Straubinger, 1912, 62: "Keine der bekannten griechischen und syrischen Versionen hat L zur Vorlage gedient."

³⁰ J. Straubinger, 1912, 66: "Der lateinische Text ist mit dem syrischen ... enger verwandt, als mit irgendeinem griechischen. Auf Grund der zahlreichen

Straubinger also went into the subject of where and when C had originated. The legend itself provides two clear indications. The first is the year in which the Cross was supposed to have been found. The Syriac as well as the Latin and Greek texts have the most varied and improbable dates, ranging from the year 200 A.D. to the year 351 A.D.³¹ The most frequently recurring date is 233 A.D. This year, however, is some hundred years before the discovery of the Cross. Some transcribers and translators apparently noticed this and in order to place the discovery in the time of Constantine and Helena or as nearly as possible to this period, they corrected the date or added the remark "after Christ's Passion/Resurrection/Ascension". However, the date 233 A.D. is easily explained when connecting C with P. As I have already argued above, P also circulated apart from the *DA* in Syria as an independent narrative. Some of these independent Ps end with a paragraph which tells how the Jews took the Cross found by Protonike away from Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem, and buried it twenty ells deep. All this happened during the reign of Trajan (98-117).³² It had been to Simeon's predecessor, James, that Protonike had originally given the Cross. This paragraph is obviously meant to connect C with P. In several texts Judas Cyriacus is said to have discovered the Cross for the second time and this remark only makes sense on the assumption of a first discovery, i.e. the one made by Protonike.³³ In this case the year 233 A.D. begins to make sense too. It should not be considered as

Besonderheiten des lateinischen und syrischen Textes ... ist eine direkte Ableitung aus dem Syrischem wahrscheinlich, wenn auch nicht sicher." It must be admitted that no final conclusions about the Syriac origin of C can be made until all extant manuscripts of C in Latin, Greek and Syriac have been scrutinized.

³¹ For a complete list of dates, see J. Straubinger, 1912, 50.

³² BL Add. 12174 = E. Nestle, 1889, 41-42: "Wieder aber und zwar in den Tagen Trajans des grausamen Kaisers befahl er, dass jeder der es mit der Lehre Christi halte, Strafe empfangen. Und es erhob sich das Horn des Volks der Juden und sie fingen an das Volk der Christen zu martern, wie es ihre Väter den Propheten gemacht hatten und sie versammelten sich gegen den Bischof Simeon, der in Jerusalem (als solcher) eingesetzt war in der Kirche und legten die Hände an ihn und schmähten ihn, weil noch das Volk, das sich zu Christus bekannte, nicht zahlreich wahr. Die Juden aber, die den Simeon marterten, nahmen von ihm das Holz des Kreuzes unseres Erlösers Und die Juden beschlossen, es in (mitten) der Erde zu verbergen, damit die Christen Christum nicht mehr anbeten sollten Sie ... gruben in der Erde gegen 20 Ellen tief und verbargen es ...". Ox. 163 = D. Loftus, 1686, 11-13, has a similar passage.

³³ E. Nestle, 1895, 338-339: "Es ergibt sich ... als unabweisbare Folgerung, dass alle Fassungen der Helenalegende [Nestle means C, J.W.D.], welche das Jahr 233 nennen, die Vergrabung des Kreuzes unter Trajan, wenn aber diese, dann auch offenbar seine erstmalige Auffindung, mit einem Wort die Protonicelegende, voraussetzen."

a date, but as the period of time which elapsed after the reburial of the Cross by the Jews in the time of Trajan and its rediscovery in the time of Constantine. The second clue is given by the reburial of the Cross at the specific depth of twenty ells, which is mentioned not only in the Syriac but also in the Greek and Latin texts of C. This depth is also mentioned in the last paragraph of some of the independent Ps, so that its recurrence in C can be traced back to P.³⁴ Thus C must have undoubtedly had an initial connection with P, even though C soon began to circulate as an independent narrative and in fact became the account of Helena's discovery of the Cross most popular in the West.³⁵ It eventually replaced H, which faded into the background.

All this naturally has consequences when an attempt is made to establish C's region of origin. If P was only known in Syria, then C must also have originated here, possibly even in Edessa.³⁶

Unlike P, C also soon became known beyond the boundaries of Syria. The church historian Sozomen clearly refers to C in his account of the discovery of the Cross by Helena. He relates how Helena found the site where the Cross lay hidden under the guidance of signs and dreams revealed to her by God, and not by means of information from a Jew, who supposedly got his knowledge about the hiding-place of the Cross from an ancestral document.³⁷ This remark of Sozomen serves as a *terminus ante quem* in establishing the date of origin of C. A *terminus post quem* is of course provided by C's original connection with P. In view of the fact that P originated around the year 400 and that Sozomen wrote his *Church History* in the 440's, C must have been composed

³⁴ Judas' father remarks: "Beware, my son, when the wood on which our forefathers hung Jesus is sought after, if it happens that those people who before also had searched for it" (f.18"); this may be another reference to P.

³⁵ R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 86: "Die Cyriacuslegende muss also von vornherein mit der syrischen Protonikesage in Verbindung gestanden haben." A. Baumstark, 1922, 98: "Unter dem doppelten Einfluss dieser einheimischen Protonike- und der abendländischen Helenalegende [Baumstark thinks H to be of Latin origin, J.W.D.] ist alsdann eine spezifisch syrische Erzählung über die—nunmehr zweite—Auffindung durch Helena entstanden ... eine Erzählung, die ... fast ausnahmslos mit dem Berichte über die erste Auffindung verbunden und mit dieser durch Klammer eines solchen über eine Wiederverbergung des Kreuzes zusammengehalten in verselbstständiger Form in das griechische und lateinische Schrifttum überging."

³⁶ J. Straubinger, 1912, 74: "Die Heimat von Cyriacus ist der Orient, näherhin Syrien. Ob sie gerade im literarischen Mittelpunkt Syriens, in Edessa, entsprungen, lassen wir dahin gestellt." See also L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 183; R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 84; *Lib. Pont.* I, CVIII. Cf. N. Pigoulewski, 1927-1928, 319-325.

³⁷ Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,4.

in the first half of the fifth century.³⁸

Sozomen's remark shows that C was not considered an authentic account of the discovery of the Cross, or at least not in the Greek-speaking part of the empire. It seems that in this region C remained less popular than the H version of the legend.³⁹ In the Latin West, C seems to have been more popular, although initially the Church authorities doubted its credibility, as appears from the *Decretum Gelasianum*: *Item scriptura de inventione crucis Dominicae et alia scriptura de inventione capitis beati Iohannis Baptistae, novellae quidem relationes sunt, et nonnulli eas catholici legunt. Sed cum haec ad catholicorum manus advenerint, beati Pauli apostoli praecedat sententia: 'Omnia probate, quod bonum est, tenete'*.⁴⁰ From this decree, which dates from c.500, it can be inferred that some stories about the discovery of the Cross were considered novelties which should not be assumed as true. This undoubtedly also applied to C. Through the works of Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, Sulpicius Severus but especially through Rufinus' *Church History*, the legend of Helena had become the accepted account of the discovery of the Cross. Therefore a critical attitude towards other versions of the same event could be expected.⁴¹ However, C gradually became acknowledged and even finally ousted H. Already at the beginning of the fifth century the *Liber Pontificalis* mentions the fact that Judas Cyriacus was baptized on the same day the Cross was found.⁴² Although Cyriacus is here not yet held responsible for the discovery, it was not long before this became accepted. Several decades after the composition of the *Liber Pontificalis*, Gregory of Tours (c.540-594) asserted that Helena had found the Cross with the help of Judas Cyriacus.⁴³ From then on C became the version most favoured by medieval Christians in the West. It is perhaps worth repeating that C, of course, reached the Latin West as an independent story unconnected with P. There is no longer any question of a second discovery, but simply

³⁸ J. Straubinger, 1912, 76: "C ist in der ersten Hälfte des 5. Jhdts. abgefasst." See also L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 180 and R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 76.

³⁹ Later Byzantine writers like Georgius Monachus, Malalas, Theophanes and Cedrenus are also silent about C.

⁴⁰ *Decretum Gelasianum* IV 4 = E. von Dobschütz, *Das Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 38,4, 43-44.

⁴¹ See J. Straubinger, 1912, 73.

⁴² *Lib. Pont.* I, 167: *Sub huius tempora inventa est crux domini nostri Iesu Christi V non. mai., et baptizatus est Iudas qui est Quiriacus.*

⁴³ Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, I 36* (MGH, 27): *Huius tempore venerabile crucis dominicae lignum per studium Helenae matris repertum est, prodente Iuda Hebraeo, qui post baptismum Quiriacus est vocitatus.*

of the one and only discovery of the Cross. The initial neglect of C in the Latin West and its unpopularity in the Greek East once again suggest that Syria may well have been its region of origin. Besides, in Syria the story remained extremely popular, as its incorporation in homilies and other writings shows.⁴⁴

C was inevitably based on H. Unlike P, which was also based on H, but which differed from it at many points, C is much closer to H. The main outlines of H return in C:

- Helena goes to Jerusalem to search for the Cross.
- She assembles the Jews of Jerusalem and its vicinity, to inform her of the exact hiding-place of the Cross.⁴⁵
- God reveals the place to Judas and he finds three crosses; the true one is identified by the resurrection of a dead youth.⁴⁶
- Helena has a silver casket made to preserve the Cross.⁴⁷
- Helena builds a church on Golgotha.
- Judas also discovers the nails.⁴⁸
- Helena has a bridle made out of the nails for the emperor's horse, thereby fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy (14:20).⁴⁹

⁴⁴ R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 85; L.J. Tixeront, 1888, 182; J. Straubinger, 1912, 76. The legend is also mentioned by Moses of Chorene, *Hist. Arm.* II 84. R.A. Lipsius, 1880, 81-84, thought that besides a connection with P, C must also have been related in some sense to the *Actus Silvestri* (S). Like some texts of C, S begins with Constantine's victory over the barbarians on the Danube. In both legends Helena travels to Jerusalem to search for the Cross. Because of these similarities, Lipsius supposed that S was a "Weiterbildung" of C. The supposed connection is underlined by the occurrence of both legends in Cod. Londin. Add. 12174. In the *Decretum Gelasianum* (*Decretum Gelasianum* IV 4 = E. von Dobschütz, *Das Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 38,4, 42-43) the one legend is mentioned immediately after the other. Moses of Chorene also mentions both legends (*Hist. Arm.* II 80 and 84), while Jacob of Sarug (451-521) preached about them (Lipsius, 83). Lipsius therefore thinks, like L. Duchesne (*Lib. Pont.* CXVII-CXX) that S not only circulated in Syria but was probably also of Syrian origin. Cf. W. Levison, 1924, 181-186, who holds the view that S must have had its origin in Rome.

⁴⁵ Cf. Paulinus of Nola's version (*Epist.* 31,5), which relates that Helena questioned Christians and the most learned of the Jews, and Rufinus (*Hist. Eccl.* X 7), who mentions her questioning of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In contrast to these two Latin versions, in C Helena knows that the Cross was hidden on Golgotha but she does not know where Golgotha is located.

⁴⁶ Cf. H and God's revelation of the place to Helena and the identification of the True Cross by the healing/coming to life of a mortally sick/dead woman.

⁴⁷ In contrast to H, the sending of part of the Cross to the emperor is left out.

⁴⁸ Cf. Helena's finding of the nails in H.

⁴⁹ In contrast to H, the incorporation of the nails in the emperor's helmet is omitted.

- Before Helena returns home, she leaves many presents with the bishop of the city for the support of the poor.⁵⁰

There are many similarities between C and H. Therefore Straubinger was right in asserting that C must be considered "eine Ausgestaltung oder Umgestaltung von H".⁵¹ The main differences between C and H are the insertion of the Jew Judas Cyriacus as the main character of the legend, and the message which the legend propagates. To begin with Judas. He was definitely a non-historical person created for the sake of the legend's message.⁵² He replaces both Helena and Macarius from the H version. Macarius is not mentioned at all,⁵³ and Helena only has a minor role. It is Judas who finds the Cross, who identifies the sacred wood and who discovers the nails.

The prominence of Judas is bound up with the message of the legend. One does not have to be an observant reader to notice the polemizing of C against the Jews. In Helena's monologues addressed to the assembled Jews, it is obvious that she holds the Jews responsible for hiding the Cross. This is only logical considering the fact that according to the last paragraph of some texts of P (see above p. 173), the Jews deprived the Bishop of Jerusalem of the Cross and buried it.⁵⁴ Helena evidently represents the state and she wants to find the Cross in order to give a severe blow to Judaism in its confrontation with Christianity.⁵⁵ She is ready to do this by force if necessary and with the help of the

⁵⁰ Cf. the empress' care for the poor and needy mentioned in H.

⁵¹ J. Straubinger, 1912, 78; 80.

⁵² Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* IV 5, mentions a Judas, who lived in the time of Hadrian, and was Bishop of Jerusalem.

⁵³ It is striking that there is a reference to another bishop, namely Eusebius, said to be Bishop of Rome. He was one of those who accompanied Helena to the Holy Land (f.22^v). The mention of Eusebius might be another indication of C's Syrian origin. Eusebius is also called Bishop of Rome in the Syriac Julian romance. As bishop he vigorously withstood Julian's policy of re-paganizing the Roman Empire; see H. Gollancz, 1928, 7-65; M. van Esbroeck, 1987. Several Latin, Greek and Syriac versions of C begin with Constantine's conversion and baptism by Eusebius of Rome. A Syriac source may also be suspected for Constantine's baptism by Eusebius, instead of the more familiar one by Silvester. It could well be possible that Eusebius of Nicomedia, Bishop of Constantinople, who actually baptized Constantine, was thought by the Syrians to have been Bishop of Rome. Considering that Constantinople was also called the new or second Rome, such a confusion was easily possible.

⁵⁴ In P and in the account of H by Sulpicius Severus (*Chron.* II 34), the Jews are also considered responsible for the inaccessibility of the Cross.

⁵⁵ A. Linder, 1976, 1038-1039: "Helen's activity represents, in effect, the vigorous intervention of the State in the religious confrontation between Christianity and Judaism, by placing the State's physical means of coercion at the service of the Church."

soldiers who have come with her. She postpones the coercion, however, and tries by her speeches both to persuade the Jews to show her the place where the Cross was hidden, and to convince them of the errors of their faith. In her first speech, she tells the Jews that although they were once God's chosen people, they have now met their fate because they did not believe their own scriptures and denied the Messiah. In her second monologue, addressed to those who knew the Jewish Law, Helena alleges that they do not understand the words of their own prophets who had predicted the coming of Christ. In her third speech she again reveals to the Jews their misunderstanding of the Old Testament prophecies and the mistake they have made in continuing in the blindness of their ancestors by not accepting Christ, the Messiah. In her speeches Helena takes the traditional stand of Christianity towards Judaism. The Christian authors of Late Antiquity relentlessly underlined these points as part of the current debate between the Christian and Jewish faith: the Jews had not understood their own prophets by not recognizing Christ as the Messiah; therefore, and because they had killed Christ, God had left them. The Jews are considered blind and stubborn because they remained devoted to the faith of their ancestors.⁵⁶ In C, the Jews do not at first understand what Helena expects from them, until Judas tells them she is searching for the Cross. He tells the story he was told by his father, of how, when the Cross was searched for and eventually found, Judaism would be defeated. He was told by his father that when Christians were in search of the Cross, he should show the place where it was hidden, thus betraying Judaism and bringing victory to Christianity. To make this betrayal credible, Judas was told by his father that his ancestors, from his forefather and the proto-martyr Stephen onwards, were all secret adherents of the Christian faith. This element was undoubtedly mentioned in order to indicate that many ordinary Jews had believed in the Messiah, and were therefore potential Christians. However, they were afraid to admit their religious convictions openly for fear of the revenge to be expected from the leaders of Judaism and conservative Jews. The stoning of Stephen demonstrated that those who were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ would also persecute other Jews who believed in him.⁵⁷ The author(s) of C had apparently intended

⁵⁶ See e.g. M. Simon, 1986, 207ff.

⁵⁷ For the stoning of Stephen, one of the seven deacons of the Christian community in Jerusalem, see Acts 6-7. His martyr's death was a shining example

these passage to drive a wedge between the Jewish leaders and the common Jews.

Although Judas was told by his father that Jesus was the Messiah, he did not follow his father's advice to reveal the hiding place of the Cross when the search began. He still remained on the Jewish side, and it was only a week's torture which induced Judas to take Helena to Golgotha. When the exact place where the Cross was buried was revealed to him by a divine miracle, Judas became convinced of the power of the Christian God and the superiority of Christianity, and was instantly converted.

When the True Cross is identified, Satan is defeated. Satan who had initially defeated Christianity through the betrayal of Judas Iskarioth is himself defeated by the life-bringing power of Christ's Cross and hence by Christianity, which is given back to the world again by another, new Judas. Satan definitely stands for Judaism, the evil faith, which killed Christ, but is now in its turn 'killed' by Christ's Cross which stands for life, as the resurrection of the dead person demonstrates.

After Christianity had triumphed in the discovery of the Cross and the nails, and Helena had accomplished her mission, a last measure was taken by the empress against the Jews. They were persecuted and expelled from Judaea, by which act the ancient Jewish land was definitively turned into a Christian Holy Land.⁵⁸

However, C is not only a polemic against Judaism. It is also a story of conversion which encourages the Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The Jew Judas, although initially reluctant to abandon Judaism, becomes a wholehearted convert to Christianity. He is baptized, becomes bishop of Jerusalem and even dies a martyr's death in the reign of Julian the Apostate.⁵⁹ Undoubtedly

for later martyrs (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 1; V 2). The introduction of Stephen in C might have been an 'act of fashion'. In the first decades of the fifth century, the period of origin of C, Stephen was highly venerated, especially by the Theodosian empresses, and his relics were a desirable possession. After Stephen's grave had been discovered on 3 August 415 in Kaphargamala, a village near Jerusalem, part of his relics were transported to Constantinople on the order of Pulcheria, the pious sister of the Emperor Theodosius II. Stephen's remains were ceremonially brought into the imperial city, in a manner comparable to an emperor's *adventus*; see K.G. Holum, G. Vikan, 1979. In Constantinople a special church was built in honour of Stephen. Theodosius' wife, Eudocia, who spent part of her life in the Holy Land, in 439 dedicated a sanctuary on the site where Stephen was stoned to death. See K.G. Holum, 1982, 103-109, 136-137, 186, 219; E.D. Hunt, 1981, 171-172.

⁵⁸ The expulsion of the Jews might be included in C in imitation of P, which also ends with the banishment of the Jews (from Italy).

⁵⁹ C already looks ahead to Judas Cyriacus martyr's death. After Judas'

Judas had to serve as an example for his fellow believers, who are all considered potential Christians. This emerges from the remarks that the firstborn of Israel as well as the Jewish scribes knew very well that Jesus was the Messiah (f.18^v), and from the reference to Saul, who turned from being a persecutor of the Christians to being an apostle of the Christian faith (f.18^v-f.20^r). It cannot be a coincidence that the principal person of C is named Judas. Phonetically the name Judas is very similar to *Judaeus* (= Jew), which may mean that he is presented as the representative of all Jewry, the history of whose conversion is worth following. But Judas is also presented as the opposite of the other Judas, namely Judas Iskarioth, whose evil conspiracy with the Jewish priesthood resulted in the crucifixion of Christ. In the Christian literature of Late Antiquity, Judas Iskarioth is described as the typical character (*figura*) and representative of the unbelieving and treacherous Jewish people.⁶⁰ In Christian opinion all Jews can be identified with Iskarioth. The betrayal of Christ by Judas Iskarioth, i.e. by Jewry, his subsequent death on the Cross and Jewish rejection of Christianity, is compensated for by the legendary Judas who betrayed his own people by surrendering the victorious Cross to the Christians, who recognized the Messiah and who eventually became Cyriacus (= of the Lord). Therefore the story of Judas' conversion gives expression to the Christian hope that all Jews one day, like Judas, will reach the insight that their religious conviction is erroneous, and that they will become converted to the Christian faith.

identification of the sacred wood, Satan exclaimed that he would go to another king who would extinguish the name of the crucified and who would expose Judas Cyriacus to many tortures (f.22^v). This other king can be no other than Julian the Apostate in whose reign, according to the *Acta Cyriaci*, Cyriacus died as a martyr. The accounts about Judas Cyriacus' finding of the Cross and his martyrdom probably constituted an entity. In at least two Syriac manuscripts (BL Add. 14644; N.S. 4 in Leningrad) the story about his discovery of the Cross is immediately followed by his martyrdom in the reign of Julian. I. Guidi, 1904, 79-95, published the account of Judas Cyriacus' martyrdom in BL Add. 14644; Guidi also published a Coptic (1904, 310-332) and an Ethiopian manuscript (1906) text on the same subject. N. Pigoulewski, 1927-1928, published the Leningrad manuscript N.S. 4 on Judas' martyrdom.

⁶⁰ Ambrose, *Expl. Ps.* 40, 32 = *CSEL* 64, 251: *Et quia Judas figura erat infidelis populi Iudaeorum* Jerome, *In Ps.* 108 = *PL* 26, 1224: *Specialiter intelligitur de Juda: generaliter autem de Judaeis* See A. Linder, 1976, 1037-1038.

EPILOGUE

In the original version of legend of the discovery of the Cross Helena is portrayed as the perfect Christian empress, the feminine counterpart of the perfect Christian emperor, Constantine. Her piety makes her the most suitable mediator between God and the world of man for the revelation of the hiding-place of the Cross. It is to Helena in her role as the instrument of God that a *caeleste indicium*¹ appears, when the place where the Cross lay hidden cannot be located by ordinary means.² When not one but three crosses are discovered and there is some doubt among Helena and her companions as to which one is the True Cross, a *divinum testimonium* again is necessary. But now the function of mediator is taken over by Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem. Helena becomes the observer of Macarius' identification of the True Cross by the healing of a mortally sick woman (or a dead man). This episode in the legend is of importance not only because of the identification of the holy wood. The revival of the woman by the touch of the holy Cross demonstrates its beneficial power, which symbolizes the redeeming power of all Christianity. Her healing symbolizes the salvation which Christianity can bring to all who believe in Christ. Immediately after her recovery, the woman recognizes this redeeming power of the Christian faith and glorifies God's name. And though none of the authors of the legend say so, she must certainly have been converted. The woman is said to be a distinguished native of Jerusalem.³ Could she perhaps have been Jewish? In that case her cure could be interpreted as a liberation from her Jewish faith, which Christians considered a dead faith,⁴ and her conversion could be taken in a metaphorical sense as a coming back to life.

After this episode of the identification of the True Cross, Helena again comes to the forefront. She searches for the nails and by finding them fulfils Zechariah's prophecy, according to some

¹ Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 7.

² See also F. Thelamon, 1981, 346.

³ Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 7; Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* I 17 = PG 67, 120; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* II 1,7; Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* I 18,4.

⁴ The Church Fathers considered dead all those who did not believe in Christ. E.g. Ambrose, *Exp. Evang. sec. Luc.* VII 235 = CC ser. lat. 14, 295: ... *qui in Christum non credidit, semper est mortuus.*

authors. The fulfilment of this prophecy is of extreme importance because it symbolizes the establishment of a secular Christian reign. By proving the truth of the prophecy, Helena becomes, with Constantine, the foundress of the new Christian empire. Helena's sending of the nails to her son and their inclusion in the bridle of the emperor's horse and the emperor's helmet/diadem, which were both passed on from emperor to emperor, symbolize the Christianity of the Roman emperors and the continuity of Christian rule.

Helena's dispatch of part of the Cross to Constantine has the same symbolic force. The Cross protects the Christian emperor like a *phylaktèrion*, but it serves also as a *tropaeum*, a representation of the heavenly alliance between the emperor and the Christian God. The *tropaeum* may help to defeat enemies, religious enemies like Jews and pagans, as well as the enemy on the battlefield. The Cross provides a *triumphus* for the emperor as well as for Christianity.⁵ The part of the Cross Helena leaves behind in Jerusalem, together with the churches she builds there, transforms the city from a pagan and Jewish centre into a Christian one: a New Jerusalem.

Helena is presented as humble and charitable. Her humility, a feature of the true Christian, is demonstrated by her invitation of holy virgins to a banquet. Helena is presented as a very religious person, but, unlike the *virgines Christi*, she remains a lay woman. By serving the virgins at dinner she shows her humble deference to those who have dedicated their life to Christ and who live entirely in the service of the faith. Helena's charity is shown by her care for the poor and helpless, as well as by her freeing of exiles.

Helena Augusta became for many empresses and queens of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages the perfect Christian empress whose life of humble piety was an example to them. The commemoration of Aelia Flaccilla, wife of Theodosius the Great, was modelled on that of Helena.⁶ The wife of Theodosius II (408-450), Aelia Eudocia, made a pilgrimage through the Holy Land and searched for relics in imitation of Helena.⁷ In the *vita* of

⁵ Rufinus, *Expositio Symboli* 12 = CC ser. lat. 20, 149: *Unde sciendum est quod crux ista triumphus erat: triumphus enim insigne est tropaeum; tropaeum autem devicti hostis indicium est.* For the Cross as trophy, see R. Storch, 1970.

⁶ K.G. Holum, 1982, 26-28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 184ff. The Coptic legend about Eudocia's discovery of Christ's tomb, a story clearly inspired by the legend of Helena's discovery of the Cross, was based upon Eudocia's stay in the Holy Land; see H.A. Drake *et al.*, 1980, 147ff.

Radegunde from c.600, the deeds of this Frankish queen are compared to those of Helena.⁸ Aelia Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius II, was cheered by the bishops at the council of Chalcedon (451) as the "New Helena", while her husband Marcianus whom she had lately married, was applauded as the "New Constantine".⁹ The comparison of a ruling couple with Helena and Constantine occurred regularly from Late Antiquity on, as in the case of the Byzantine emperor Justinus II (565-578) and his wife Sophia, or that of King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha of Kent, whose conversions are compared by Pope Gregory the Great with those of the first Christian emperor and his mother.¹⁰

It was Helena's central role in the legend of the discovery of the True Cross which established her reputation as the foundress of Christian rule on earth. For this, as well as for her model life of humility and piety, she was awarded the epithet 'holy'. Thus the legend made Helena a famous saint of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church.¹¹

The legend of the discovery of the Cross originated in Jerusalem in the second half of the fourth century. The reason for its origin was undoubtedly the presence of a piece of wood thought to be the Cross of Christ, preserved in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem which had been the reason for building it. The first (oral) version(s) of the legend probably related only how and when the Cross had been found and did not yet include Helena as the discoverer of the holy wood. A second reason for the birth of the legend was the additional weight it lent to the efforts of Cyril of Jerusalem in obtaining the primacy of Palestine for his see in Jerusalem. Helena was included in the legend to establish a connection between the bishopric of Jerusalem and the imperial house and thus to give this claim additional weight. Once launched the legend of Helena spread rapidly westwards and eastwards. When it reached Edessa, it was adapted in such a way that it could easily be included in the *Doctrina Addai*, an account about the conversion to Christianity of the king and the people of Edessa

⁸ *Vita Radegundis* II 16 = *SS rer. Mer.* II, 388: *Quod fecit illa [Helena] in orientali parti, hoc fecit beata Radegundis in Gallia.* See E. Ewig, 1956-58, 23-24.

⁹ E. Schwartz, *Conc. univ. Chalcedonense* II, 2, 1936, 101: ... *Novus Constantinus Marcianus, nova Helena Pulcheria. Helenae fidem tu ostendisti. Zelus Helenae in te probatur. Crucem Christi tu defendis. Invenit Helena, salvavit Pulcheria.* See also K.G. Holum, 1982, 214-216.

¹⁰ E. Ewig, 1956-58, 8-9.

¹¹ Her saint's day in the Eastern Church is 21 May. The Roman Catholic Church celebrates her saint's day on 18 August. For regions where Saint Helena was held in high esteem, see A. Linder, 1975, 86-87, 91-93.

which occurred as early as the first century. In this way the legend of Protonike came into existence. The Judas Cyriacus legend probably also originated in Edessa, or, at any rate, definitely in its neighbouring region. The legend of Judas Cyriacus is closely connected with the legend of Protonike; the latter tells of the first discovery of the Cross in the first century, while the Judas Cyriacus legend presents an account of the second discovery by the Jew Judas in the time of Helena. Unlike the Protonike legend, the Judas Cyriacus legend also became known outside Syria. Eventually it became the most popular version of the legend of the discovery of the Cross. Remarkably, when the legend spread and became known in more versions, the anti-Jewish element increased considerably. It remains to be established why the character of the legend changed so rapidly from mildly anti-pagan to fiercely anti-Jewish.

In the first half of the fourth century Christianity's main adversary was paganism. Thanks to the anti-pagan policy of the emperors beginning with Constantine the Great, pagan cults declined considerably, and by c.400 paganism was no longer a threat to Christianity. The Church's greatest opponent had now become the Jewish faith. In Late Antiquity Christianity was still close to Judaism. The differences between the Jewish and Christian faith were not always clear and many Christians felt attracted to Judaism, took part in its festivals, visited synagogues, consulted Jewish doctors, and even converted. This, of course, led to the Church's fierce opposition of Judaism.

From the very beginning of Christianity there had been controversies between Jews and Christians, the earliest evidence of which can be found in the Gospels.¹² In these controversies, which often took the form of *disputationes*,¹³ learned Christians attempted to break away from Judaism, trying to make clear that God had left his chosen people in favour of the Christians. But despite the Church's opposition to Judaism, it remained a religiously vital faith with strong powers of attraction for Christians. It is even supposed that the third and fourth centuries, a period of rapid growth for Christianity, were also the "time of new life and vitality within the Jewish communities of the empire, of material prosperity and economic growth, of spiritual creativity and intellectual productivity".¹⁴ This serious adversary of Christianity

¹² J.G. Gager, 1983, 135.

¹³ See for these *ibid.*, 153-159.

¹⁴ R.L. Wilken, 1983, 46.

had to be defeated and it was in the fourth century that the leaders of the Church fully revealed their anti-Judaism.¹⁵ On the one hand Christian theologians must have felt confident in launching their attack just at this time because of the conversion of the Roman emperors to Christianity; on the other hand they may have been motivated by the fear that after the reign of Julian another emperor could mount the throne who might support Judaism.¹⁶

In their theological treatises and sermons Church Fathers around 400 polemized fiercely against Judaism. Their language against the Jews is often aggressive, abusive, and sometimes even obscene. A reverent bishop like Ambrose accuses the Jews of purposely killing Christ and of denying their own prophets. The Jews are deprived of God's grace and God has left them for the Christians. Ambrose considers the Jews (metaphorically) dead because they do not believe in Christ the Messiah. He calls the Jews greedy, sexually licentious and mad. Their synagogues are houses of unbelief and madness condemned by God himself. The Christian church has now taken the place of the Jewish synagogue as the *Verus Israel*.¹⁷ In the same vein a famous theologian like Jerome accuses the Jews of murdering Christ, for which they are condemned in all eternity. Jerome relegated the learning of the Jewish scribes to old wives' tales. The synagogue is like a prostitute, and praying and psalm-singing Jews are compared to growling pigs and braying donkeys. Jerome considers the Jews persecutors of the Church.¹⁸ The theological torrents of abuse against the Jews reach a climax in a series of sermons called *Adversus Judaeos*, delivered in Antioch in the years 386-387 by John Chrysostom, in reaction against the participation of many Antiochene Christians in the Jewish festivals. Chrysostom devotes all his rhetorical skills to convincing his Christian flock not to participate in these rites. Like Ambrose and Jerome he accuses the Jews of killing Christ and of not believing in their own prophets. He calls the Jews stubborn, wretched and the sickness of the world. They are like animals fit only for slaughter, they are licentious and they even go so far as to sacrifice their own children to appease demons. Their synagogue is like a theatre and a house of prostitution.¹⁹

¹⁵ M. Simon, 1986, 112.

¹⁶ The fear of an unbeliever once again succeeding to the imperial throne is expressed by e.g. John Chrysostom, *Adv. Oppugnatores Vitae Monasticae* 2,9 = PG 47, 344.

¹⁷ H. Schreckenberg, 1990, 303-310.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 333-339.

¹⁹ J. Parkes, 1964, 163-167; W.A. Meeks, R.L. Wilken, 1978; H. Schreckenberg,

Many pages could be filled with the ravings of Chrysostom and other Church officials against the Jews, but even from this brief glance, it is obvious that the Church's attitude towards Judaism was implacable.

The aggressive verbal attitude of Church leaders and theologians created an atmosphere in which real aggression against the Jews was not exceptional. Synagogues in particular became the target of Christian anti-Judaism. The deliberate demolition of a synagogue in Callinicum has already been mentioned above (p. 144, n. 61). This was definitely not a unique case. Other cases are known like, for instance, the destruction of a synagogue in Rome in 388 by a Christian mob and the demolition of a Jewish sanctuary in Magona on the island of Menorca by the bishop and the priesthood of the place.²⁰ In the first decades of the fifth century the monk Barsauma and his followers organized pogroms against the Jews in Palestine and demolished their synagogues.²¹ In 414 Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, expelled the Jews from his city and confiscated their property and houses of worship.²²

The Roman emperors attempted to suppress the deeds of violence against the Jews by legislation.²³ Since the time of Julius Caesar Judaism had been considered a *religio licita* and its followers could profess their faith freely under protection of the law. In the fourth century also, the Christian emperors offered the Jews legal protection and even offered the Jewish priesthood certain privileges, such as the exemption from the burdensome office of *curialis*. However, Roman laws expressly forbade the Jews to make converts among Christians and Judaism had to remain an isolated sect²⁴ segregated from Christianity.²⁵ Around the year 400, legislation begins to reflect the increasingly anti-Jewish climate in the Christian Roman empire. Although the laws are sometimes harsh in tone and the language of the laws betrays anti-Jewish feelings,

1990, 320-329. See R.L. Wilken, 1983, 95ff., for Chrysostom's abusive language as part of the rhetoric of his day.

²⁰ M. Simon, 1986, 224ff.

²¹ See G. Stemberger, 1987, 247-251.

²² Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* VII 13 = PG 67, 760.

²³ For imperial laws regarding Jews and Judaism, see K.-L. Noethlichs, 1971; J. Cohen, 1976; A.M. Rabello, 1980; G. Stemberger, 1987, 237-264; A. Linder, 1987.

²⁴ Since the time of Claudius, Jews had been forbidden to make converts; see H. Schreckenberg, 1990, 258-259.

²⁵ Church councils, like those of Elvira and Laodicea, as well as the Apostolic Canons proclaimed a strict segregation between Jews and Christians. See C.J. von Hefele, 1873, Bd. 1, 162, 177-178, 770, 820-822.

the legislation itself actually protected the Jews and their faith. Aggression against and confiscation of synagogues remained forbidden. Christians were not allowed to disturb the assemblies of the Jews. It is significant for the anti-Jewish feelings of Christians that Theodosius the Great in one of his laws had to state explicitly that the Jewish faith was not condemned by any law and that Christians therefore had to leave the Jews alone.²⁶ His successors regularly had to repeat the laws which forbade violent acts against synagogues, a clear indication that it was difficult to enforce the laws and that the Christians did not take much notice of them and persisted in their violence against Judaism. A change in legislation began during the reign of Theodosius II (408-450). His *Novella* of 31 January 438 summed up the measures recently taken with regard to the Jews. Amongst other things Jews were no longer allowed to perform functions in the public service, although the rebuilding or repair of existing synagogues was permitted the building of new synagogues was forbidden, and Jews who made proselytes among Christians would be sentenced to death. Although these decrees did not deprive Jews of their right to exist and they remained a group protected by the emperors, they definitely show a gradual deterioration of the status of Jews and evidently reflect anti-Jewish feelings within Christian circles as expressed by men like Ambrose, Jerome and John Chrysostom. It would take only another century before Judaism was subjected, for the first time, to wholesale official persecution.²⁷

In this anti-Jewish climate the Cross became a symbol of victory over Judaism. Its discovery was the demonstrable proof that the Jews had indeed killed Christ. In this context it is therefore not at all coincidental that the legend of the discovery of the Cross, changed in attitude from lenient animosity towards the pagans to fierce antagonism against Judaism and the Jews. The theme of the legend presented every opportunity for being turned into an anti-Jewish treatise, reaching a peak in the Judas Cyriacus legend. In this version Helena, the representative of Christianity, accuses the Jews of deliberately hiding the Cross, by which their faith would be defeated if it were found. The Cross, which the Jews had hoped to use as an instrument to extinguish Christianity, became the symbol of their own defeat. In the Judas Cyriacus legend Helena's speeches reflect the opinion of Christian theologians about Judaism. Like Ambrose, Jerome and Chrysostom, Helena

²⁶ *CTh* 16.8.9, 29 Sept. 393.

²⁷ P. Brown, 1971, 174.

accuses the Jews of being blind for not understanding their own prophets, of having killed Christ and of being deserted by God for not recognizing Christ as the Messiah. The legend therefore fits perfectly into the climate of anti-Judaism at the beginning of the fifth century. It was in all likelihood because of its anti-Jewish character that the legend featuring Judas Cyriacus ousted the original legend of Helena, at least in the West, and became in the Middle Ages the most popular version of the legend of the discovery of the Cross.

APPENDIX

PORTRAITS OF HELENA

Roman emperors and empresses are known not only from written sources, but also from their portraits on coins and from the statues set up all over the empire. These portraits and statues convey an impression of the appearance and physiognomy of emperors, empresses and other dignitaries. Portraits and statues of Helena also existed. And, of course, there were portraits on coins, which gave inhabitants of the empire an impression of the (idealised) facial features of their empress. There are the ceiling-frescoes in Trier and a mosaic in Aquileia which possibly depict Helena.¹ But in addition to these representations of her, there are statues and portraits on cameos which may possibly also depict the empress. These help in building up an impression of her physical appearance. It is not my intention to present here an archaeological-physiognomical study of the portraits of Helena, but to make an inventory of portraits that might represent her.

The inscriptions dedicated to Helena during her lifetime were nearly all accompanied by statues. It is certain that *CIL* VI 1134 (= *ILS* 709) was dedicated together with a statue. The marble base on which the text was inscribed has a hole in the upper surface where the statue was attached. According to B. Ward-Perkins, three other inscriptions (*CIL* X 517 = *ILS* 708; *CIL* X 1483, 1484) were accompanied by statues.² In the case of the discovery of *CIL* IX 2446, fragments of a statue were also found. Unfortunately, the inscription and the fragments were lost soon after their discovery.

Many statues of Helena were set up after her death. Shortly after she had died, Constantine erected a statue of his mother on the forum of Constantinople as the counterpart to a statue of himself.³ In the Byzantine period Constantinople and many other places had statues and portraits of Helena.⁴ These were set up to

¹ For the ceiling frescoes, see above pp. 24–28. H. Kähler, 1962, Abb. 7, and W.N. Schumacher, 1977, 293, identify one of the figures on the mosaic in Aquileia as Helena. Others contest their opinion. For further literature, see H.P. L'Orange, 1984, 119.

² B. Ward-Perkins, 1984, 26, 230.

³ *Chron. Pasch.* a.328.

⁴ Codinus, *De Signis, Statuis*, 16.C/D; 20.A; 21.B. *Incerti auctores, Breves enarrat.*

commemorate her discovery of the True Cross and often show Helena together with Constantine and a cross. All these statues are now lost.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to say anything conclusive about the identification of statues representing Helena. Because an inscription has never been found together with a statue, direct identification is impossible.⁵ Nevertheless, statues, busts and marble heads have been found through the years and identified as Helena. Twenty sculpted portraits in total, including the unauthentic bust on her porphyry sarcophagus, and distributed mainly throughout European museums, are thought to represent Helena. They have all been catalogued by M. Wegner, who also gives an opinion about their identification as Helena.⁶ His criterion for identification is Helena's hairstyle as shown on the Augusta coins. Wegner is right to test the portraits using this criterion, because Helena's coiffure is well attested and the only constant feature on the coin portraits, unlike for example her facial features. Her hair is sleekly combed and worn in a knot over the middle of the head. The ears are visible and the hair style is completed by a diadem.

Taking the hair style as a criterion, only four of the twenty sculptures may represent Helena.⁷ Of these four, two can be

Chronogr., P95.B; P100.D, in: *CSHB*, ed. G. Niebuhr, Bonn 1843. *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* 11 (70-73), 16 (78-79), 34 (94-95), 43 (118-119), 52 (126-127), 58 (134-135); the numbers between brackets refer to the pages of the latest edition of the *Parastaseis* (eighth century) by Av. Cameron, J. Herrin, 1984.

⁵ I. Lavin, 1967b, 58, implies that the statue now in the chapel of St. Helen in the church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme (Rome), may represent Helena. During excavations in the mid-sixteenth century the statue and its marble base (with the inscription *CIL VI 1134*) was found, together with statues of Constantine and his sons, in the garden of the church of S. Croce. The statue is authentically classical in style and was probably an earlier work reused during Constantine's reign. Lavin thinks it possible that the Flemish painter Rubens was inspired by this statue when in 1601-1602 he painted 'Helena holding the True Cross'. This painting hung over the altar in the chapel of St. Helen until it was removed toward the middle of the eighteenth century and replaced by the statue from which Rubens had drawn his inspiration. According to Lavin, the same statue was the model for Andrea Bolgi's statue of Helena holding the Cross in St. Peter's.

⁶ M. Wegner, 1984, 143-148.

⁷ Berlin, Pergamommuseum, Inv. Nr. 449 (R 120), bust, life-sized (M. Wegner, 1984, 143-144). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, Inv. Nr. 1914, 171, seated statue, smaller than life-sized (M. Wegner, 1984, 144). Rome, Museo Capitolino, Sala Imperatori, Inv. 496, marble head on seated statue, life-sized (M. Wegner, 1984, 146). Rome, Vatican, Palazzo del Governatorato, Inv. 19152, bust, nearly life-sized (M. Wegner, 1984, 146-147). For the bust in the Palazzo del Governatorato see also *Spätantike und frühes Christentum*, 1983, 429-430. H. v. Heintze, 1971, 61 and 71, thinks that busts in the Musée Bardo in Tunis, the National Museum in Athens and probably a bust which circulated in the art trade, represent Helena.

identified as Helena with a reasonable degree of certainty. However, there is no unequivocal evidence and the identification is based on scholarly consensus. The one is a life-sized head, placed upon the statue of a seated woman. This sculpture is now in the Museo Capitolino in Rome and was formerly considered to represent Agrippina, hence its name Agrippina Capitolina.⁸ The other is a nearly life-sized bust in the Palazzo del Governatorato in the Vatican. Because of its similarity to the head in the Museo Capitolino, this bust is also thought to represent Helena. Of course, these are idealised portraits which do not show Helena as she really was. There is no definite evidence for identifying the other statues, busts and sculpted heads as Helena.

Helena is possibly depicted on two famous cameos: the so-called Ada-cameo, preserved in the 'Stadtbibliothek' in Trier, and a cameo in the 'Koninklijk Penningkabinet' in Leiden (formerly in The Hague).⁹ The Ada-cameo decorates the front cover of the Ada Manuscript—also called *codex aureus*—named after Ada, sister of Charlemagne, who once owned the manuscript. The cameo measures 10.7 x 8.5 cm. and shows two eagles with spread wings and five portrayals of imperial figures. The date of the cameo, and hence the identification of the portrayed persons, has long been under discussion. A. Furtwängler dated the cameo to the time of the Emperor Claudius (41-54) because of its inferior "Kunstcharakter".¹⁰ G. Bruns and W. von Sydow think the stone was carved during the reign of Theodosius I (379-395).¹¹ Today most scholars believe it was made or adapted in the Constantinian period.¹² W.B. Kaiser's identification of the figures from left to right as Helena, Constantine the Great, Constantine II, Fausta and Crispus, suggested that the stone was carved in 317. The cameo shows only two sons of Constantine and therefore it was

M. Wegner, 1984, 147, who does not mention Heintze's article, rejects the opinion that the portrait in the Musée Bardo is to be identified as Helena. Wegner does not mention the other two busts.

⁸ K. Fittschen, P. Zanker, 1983, 35-36, also identify this head as Helena.

⁹ J. Bracker, 1974, thinks it possible that Helena is also portrayed on a cameo fragment in the Römisch-Germanischen Museum in Cologne. The fragment is so incomplete that identification of portrayed persons is very difficult.

¹⁰ A. Furtwängler, 1900, III, 323-324. Represented from left to right are: Antonia, Claudius, child, Messalina, child; the two children should be Britannicus and Octavia.

¹¹ G. Bruns, 1948, 29-31. Represented from left to right are: a personification of Constantinople, Theodosius I, Honorius, Aelia Flaccilla and Arcadius. W. von Sydow, 1969, 58.

¹² M.R. Alföldi, 1963, 127, chooses for adaptation: "... der ursprünglich wohl claudische Stein ...".

fabricated before 7 August 317, when Constantine's third son, Constantius II, was born.¹³ Wegner recognizes Constantius II and Constantine II in the two young men. As a result of this identification, he dates the cameo between c.318 and 323, when Constantine's son Constans, who is not portrayed, was born. Wegner also identifies the left-hand figure as Helena.¹⁴

The cameo in Leiden is comparatively large: 21.1 x 29.7 cm. It shows a triumphant emperor and his family standing in a chariot drawn by two centaurs. Below the chariot is a fallen *krater*. The right centaur tramples two defeated enemies. The top of the cameo, on the right side, shows a flying *Victoria* who offers the emperor a laurel crown. The emperor wears a laurel wreath on his head and carries a thunderbolt in his right hand. His left arm is around the shoulder of the empress. Emperor and empress are facing each other. In front of the imperial couple stands a small boy in military dress and behind the emperor is portrayed a woman with a laurel wreath and with hair worn in a knot on her neck. The stone is dated by many scholars to the time of Claudius, and some even consider it a forgery from the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹⁵ However, the cameo is dated by some to the Constantinian period. Bruns identifies the imperial couple as Constantine and Fausta, and the other two figures as Constantius II and Helena. According to her, the cameo was made for the occasion of Constantius' elevation as Caesar in the autumn of 324.¹⁶ Objections have been raised against Bruns' interpretation. In the first place, it is considered odd that, apart from Constantius II, Constantine's other sons are not portrayed. Secondly, the woman behind the emperor looks too young to be Helena, and thirdly, the pagan iconography suggests an earlier date. A.N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta thus dates the cameo to 315, the year of Constantine's *Decennalia*. The figures portrayed are then Constantine and Fausta, and Crispus and Helena.¹⁷ Fifteen years later Zadoks gave another interpretation. Constantine and Fausta should be considered as representations of Dionysus and Ariadne; the boy is

¹³ W.B. Kaiser, 1964. See also A.N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, 1966, 98-99 and *Spätantike und frühes Christentum*, 1983, 432-433.

¹⁴ M. Wegner, 1984, 127. Portrayed are from left to right: Helena, Constantine, Constantius II, Fausta and Constantinus II.

¹⁵ See for bibliographical references *Spätantike und frühes Christentum*, 1983, 435-437. It is significant that R. Delbrück, 1933, M.R. Alföldi, 1963 and M. Wegner, 1984, do not even mention this cameo.

¹⁶ G. Bruns, 1948, 8-16.

¹⁷ A.N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, 1951; see also H.A. Pohlsander, 1984, 96-97.

Crispus, whereas the woman behind the emperor should be Claudia, Constantine's paternal grandmother.¹⁸ F.L. Bastet has quite a different interpretation.¹⁹ He believes there is a connection between the cameo and the miracle which took place at the shrine of Apollo in Grand in 310.²⁰ In Grand a *Victoria* crowned Constantine with a laurel wreath in the name of Apollo. In this way Constantine is symbolically identified with Apollo and his reign considered to be a *regnum Apollinis*, traditionally the golden age of the early principate. Bastet recognizes references to the early principate in the way the figures are portrayed on the cameo. Constantine is depicted as an image of Augustus and Jupiter, while Fausta, symbolizing Iuno-Ceres, is presented as a woman from the early imperial period. The boy is then Crispus, symbolizing Mars, and presented as heir to the throne. The woman behind the emperor must be Livia. The latter—wife of Augustus—would have been portrayed in order to emphasize Crispus' legitimate descent. Bastet dates the cameo to shortly after 310.

Since there is so much uncertainty surrounding the date and even the authenticity of the cameo, and hence its interpretation, there are hardly any reasonable arguments for identifying the woman behind the emperor as Helena.

R. Delbrück identifies the portraits on two gemstones, which he dates in 325-26, as Helena.²¹ One (height 1.9 cm), of which only an imprint is known, shows an elderly woman, but is definitely not Helena because of the hairstyle. The other one (height 1.2 cm) does show Helena. The hair is sleekly combed and worn in a knot. Along the edge of the stone the letters FL HEL are carved. The similarity to the portraits on the Augusta coins is striking.

One of the portraits on a bronze medallion, found in 1922 in the Loire and now in the Musée Dobrée in Nantes, is identified by H.P. L'Orange, as Helena. The medallion shows the busts of an imperial couple with a *ChiRo* sign above them. Below the couple are depicted the busts of three boys/young men. According to L'Orange the portraits represent Constantine and Helena and

¹⁸ A.N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, 1966, 91-93. G.M.A. Richter, 1971, no. 600, agrees with this interpretation.

¹⁹ F.L. Bastet, 1968.

²⁰ *Pan. Lat.* VII (6).

²¹ R. Delbrück, 1933, 165-166; Taf. 75, 4+5. Delbrück is the only one who mentions these gemstones.

Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans.²² Wegner rejects the identification of the woman as Helena. For him the portraits represent Constantine and Fausta and their three sons.²³ Wegner is probably right.

The *Codex Barberini* contains a drawing of a marble head, found on the Esquiline, with the caption 'S. Helena'. The portrait shows a woman far too young to represent Helena.²⁴

Many statues and portraits have been thought to represent Helena, but taking the hair style as a test for identification, only the statue in the Museo Capitolino, the one in the Palazzo Governatorato, the gemstone mentioned by Delbrück and possibly the left-hand female figure on the Ada-cameo are likely to be representations of Helena.

²² H.P. L'Orange, 1984, 123. Cf. J. Lafaure, 1955, 230-231, who recognizes in the small left figure not one of Constantine's sons but his halfsister Constantia.

²³ M. Wegner, 1984, 145, 153.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 146. M.C. Gualandi Genito, 1975, 88-89, 95, identifies a portrayal on a small oil lamp (in the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna) from the time of Theodosius I or his immediate successors, as Helena. Since Genito's article has no photograph of the lamp, it is difficult to say whether we have to do here with a representation of Helena.

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GENERAL INDEX

The footnotes have not been indexed for modern authors.

- Abgar (Ukkâmâ), king of Edessa, 147, 150ff., 155, 158, 162
 Acacius, *comes*, 71
 Acacius, bishop of Caesarea, 132f., 135f.
Actus Silvestri, 36-38, 155ff., 176 n.44
 Ada-cameo, 191, 194
 Addai, 147, 151f., 162
 Adonis, shrine of, 114 n.73
 Aelafius, 55
 Agricius, bishop of Trier, 23-24
 Agrippina Capitolina, 191
 Alexander Severus, 48
 Alexandria, 42, 56 n.4, 87, 100, 132
 Alföldi, A., 26, 73
 Alföldi, M.R., 26, 42
 Alpinus Magnus, 50-51
 Altilia, 50
 Altman of Hautvillers, 22-23, 28
 Alypius, 137
 Ambrose, bishop of Milan, 5, 15, 16, 36, 79, 95, 99, 105, 108-113, 114, 119, 122, 123-124, 125, 131, 144f., 161, 175, 185, 187
 Ammianus Marcellinus, 9, 137
Amphiheatrum Castrense, 32
 Anastasius IV, Pope, 75-76
 Annesys, 90
 Antioch, 10, 23, 42, 56 n.4, 70f., 87, 91, 132, 185
 Aphrodite, shrine/temple/statue of, 2, 66, 79, 83, 88f., 101, 103, 106, 111, 114, 115, 124, 126f., 143, 159
 Apronianus, 120
Aqua Augustea, 48
 Aquileia, 43 n.20, 100, 189
 Arcadius, 109
 Arianism, 38, 56, 62 n.34, 67, 71, 97, 131ff.
 Arius, 10, 38, 56 n.4, 133
 Arles, 42
 Armenia, 154, 155 n.18
 Athanasius of Alexandria, 133
 Augustus, 18, 193
 Aurelius Victor, 4
 Avita, 119f.
 Barnes, T.D., 11, 14, 18
 Barsauma, 186
 Bastet, F.L., 193
 Benenatus, 90
 Berenice, 154
 Bertha, queen of Kent, 183
 Bethlehem, 89, 114 n.72, 139
 Bithynia, 9, 16, 107
 Bordeaux pilgrim, 1, 63, 71, 84, 123
 Brandenburg, H., 27
Breviarius de Hierosolyma, 88
 Bruns, G., 191f.
 Bruttium, 50
 Burckhardt, Jacob, 4
 Caesarea, 87, 96ff., 131ff.
 Callinicum, 144 n.61, 186
 Caphar Phacar, 12
 Caracalla, 32
 ceiling frescoes, 24ff., 189
 Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia, 100 n.26
Chronica Gallica, 17
Chronicon Paschale, 10
 Chrysopolis, 41, 55, 58, 59, 66, 67, 68 n.61
 Chrysostom, John, 67 n.56, 91, 95, 112 n.60, 124, 140, 185ff.
 Churches, Anastasis, 64 n.45, 84f.; *basilica Heleniana*, 32, 34; Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 2, 57, 63f., 81, 83ff., 91, 98, 99 n.22, 104, 114, 125, 140, 142 n.50, 183; Church on the Mount of Olives, 57, 63, 64 n.45, 82, 104, 106, 114, 127, 139 n.45, 140; Martyrium, 64 n.45, 84f.; Nativity Church, 57, 63, 64 n.45, 70, 104, 106, 114, 117 n.79, 127, 139; Rotunda, 64 n.45; S. Agnese, 33 n.42; S. Croce in Gerusalemme, 32-34, 45-48, 190 n.5; S. Giovanni in Laterano, 48, 75; S. Maria in Aracoeli, 75; Ss. Marcellino e Pietro, 31-34, 38, 53 n.46, 74; St. Peter, 33 n.42, 38, 54 n.48
Circus Varianus, 32
 Claudia, 193
 Claudius, 147, 150, 154ff., 159, 161, 191f.
Codex Barberini, 194

- Colchester, 12
 Cologne, 24 n.10
 Commodus, 32
 Constans, son of Constantine I, 37, 43, 192ff.
 Constantia, 15 n.35, 39 n.2, 56 n.1
 Constantina, daughter of Constantine I, 33 n.42, 53 n.45
 Constantine I, the Great, *passim*
 Constantine II, son of Constantine I, 43, 46, 47, 191ff.
 Constantinople, 42, 44, 63, 67, 74, 85f., 96, 102ff., 189
 Constantius Chlorus, 11, 15-19, 21, 24 n.10, 36, 43, 52, 62, 96f., 110
 Constantius II, son of Constantine I, 37, 41 n.10, 43, 46, 67 n.56, 82, 84, 89, 131, 134f., 138, 140f., 192ff.
 Council of Antioch, 71f., 132
 Council of Chalcedon, 107 n.50, 183
 Council of Constantinople, 134
 Council of Ephesus, 107 n.50
 Council of Laodicaea, 91
 Council of Nicaea, 38, 56, 64 n.45, 87, 99, 132ff.
 Crispus, son of Constantine I, 25, 27-30, 40f., 46, 47, 49, 60-62, 67, 191ff.
 Cross, True/Holy, legend of, *passim*
 Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, 186
 Cyril, bishop of Caesarea, 133
 Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, 81f., 96f., 131ff., 159 n.35; letter to Constantius II, 82-83, 89, 134-136; Cyril and origin of legend of the Cross, 131-142, 183
 Cyzicus, 42
- Dalmatia, 18
 Dalmatius, 43
Decretum Gelasianum, 175
 Deichmann, F.W., 33
 Delbrück, R., 193f.
De Obitu Theodosii, 36, 95, 99, 105, 109
 Desiderius, 92 n.49
 Dessau, H., 46
 Diocletian, 11, 13, 19, 21, 23, 31, 68, 97
Doctrina Addai, 147, 150ff., 183
 Donatism, 55
 Drake, H.A., 83ff.
 Drepanum, 9-12, 16, 17 n.43, 73 n.4, 102, 104
 Drijvers, H.J.W., 152
- Echternach, 21
 Edessa, 12, 147, 150ff., 174, 183f.
 Egeria, 64, 89, 91f., 123, 125, 139, 158
Encaenia, 99 n.22
 Ephrem Syrus, 137
equites singulares, 30f.
 Ethelbert, king of Kent, 183
 Eudocia, 72 n.78, 179 n.57, 182
 Eudoxia, 5 n.11, 182 n.7
 Eusebius of Nicomedia, 10, 62 n.34, 177 n.53
 Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, 1ff., 9, 12ff., 35, 38, 43, 58, 63, 65ff., 73f., 83ff., 96ff., 102, 107, 116, 120, 128f., 132, 140, 147, 151f., 154, 158 n.35
 Eusebius, bishop of Rome, 170, 177 n.53
 Eustathius, bishop of Antioch, 38, 71
 Eustochium, 92
 Eutropia, 71
 Eutropius, 4, 15, 18
 Ewig, E., 21
- Fausta, wife of Constantine I, 13, 27, 30 n.29, 39 n.2, 40-43, 49, 60-62, 67, 191f., 194
 Favez, Ch., 109
 Flaccilla, 123, 182
 Flavius Dalmatius, 53 n.45
 Flavius Josephus, 154
 Flavius Nuvel, 90
 Flavius Optatus, 43 n.21
 Flavius Pistius, 47, 48
fundus Laurentus, 30ff., 38
 Furtwängler, A., 191
- Galeria Valeria, 39 n.3
 Galerius, 21 n.1, 39 n.3, 59
 Gallus Caesar, 67 n.56
 Gaugerich of Cambrai, 21
 Gelasius of Caesarea, 96-99, 100, 102, 104-108, 119, 122, 124f., 127f., 133f., 139, 142, 143, 157, 159 n.35
 Gelasius of Cyzicus, 97, 99
 Georgios Monachos, 97
Gesta Xysti, 32-34
 Gibbon, Edward, 1
 Glas, A., 100
 Golgotha, 64 n.45, 82, 84f., 88f., 91f., 104f., 110f., 124, 127f., 134, 139, 143, 148, 160f., 168, 170, 176, 179
 Grand, 13, 193

- Gregory of Nazianzus, 137-138
 Gregory of Nyssa, 90-91
 Gregory of Tours, 175
 Gregory the Great, Pope, 183
- Hadrian, 83, 88, 114, 138 n.38, 143
 Hanan, 150f.
 Hannibalianus, 53 n.45
 Hanslik, R., 73
 Helena Augusta, place of birth, 9-12; year of birth, 12-15; social origins, 15-17; relationship with Constantius Chlorus, 17-19; Helena-tradition in Trier, 21-30; Helena and Rome, 30-34; conversion, 35-38; *nobilissima femina*, 39-41; coins, 39-44; inscriptions, 45-54; status, 39-54; purpose of pilgrimage, 63-70; example for others, 72, 182-183; year of death, 73; buried in Rome, 74-75; discovery of Cross by Helena not historical, 81, 93; later included in legend, 95, 131, 140-141
 Helena of Adiabene, 36, 70 n.67, 154ff.
 Helena, wife of Crispus, 27-30, 40
 Helenopolis, see under Drepanum
 Helenopontus, 9 n.1
 Heraclea, 42
hereditas fidei, 110-112, 123-124
 Herod, 148, 160
 Hincmar, bishop of Reims, 22
 Holder, A., 172
 Holy Land, see under Palestine
 Honigmann, E., 134
 Honorius, 109
 Howard, G., 147
- Igel, 24 n.10
 Innocentius II, Pope, 75
 Inscriptions dedicated to Helena, 45-54, 189
 Iulius Maximilianus, 46, 48
 Izates, 154f.
- Jacob of Sarug, 176 n.44
 James, 148, 150, 159f., 173
 Jerome, 10, 17, 18, 88f., 92, 100, 112 n.62, 114 n.73, 119, 121, 185, 187
 Jerusalem, 23, 36, 57, 63f., 70, 79f., 84ff., 95, 100ff., 119ff., 125ff., 148ff., 165ff., 181f.; veneration of the Cross, 81-83, 89-93; place of origin of the legend of the Cross, 99, 131-142, 183
- Jews, 36f., 67 n.56, 111f., 115f., 136ff., 148, 150, 155f., 166f., 170f., 173f., 182; anti-Jewish character of the legend, 143-145, 161-163, 177-179, 185-188
 John XIII, Pope, 23
 John, bishop of Jerusalem, 113, 121-122, 134
 Jones, A.H.M., 47
 Judaism, see under Jews
 Judas Cyriacus, 105, 165ff., 184, 187f.
 Judas Iskarioth, 179f.
 Judas Thomas, 151, 158
 Julian the Apostate, 53 n.45, 69f., 90, 110, 133, 136-138, 142, 179, 185
 Julius Caesar, 186
 Julius Constantius, 44 n.24, 53 n.45
 Jupiter, statue of, 88f., 114, 116
 Justinian, 9
 Justinus II, 183
 Juvenalis, bishop of Jerusalem, 134
- Kaiser, W.B., 191
 Kempf, Th.K., 24, 28f.
 Klein, R., 73
- Lactantius, 28
 Laurand, M.L., 109
Laus Constantini, 63, 85
 Letters to the Eastern Provincials, 58
 Levison, W., 37
Liber Pontificalis, 4, 30, 34, 37, 175
 Licinius, 15 n.35, 27, 32 n.35, 40, 41, 47, 52, 55, 57 n.10, 58f., 62, 66, 68f., 98 n.16
 Lilybaeum, 50
 Lipsius, R.A., 153, 156, 158
 Livia, 193
 London, 42
 Lucania, 50
 Lucian, martyr, 10-12, 35, 38
 Lyons, 42, 44
- Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, 57, 64 n.45, 71, 79, 83ff., 98, 101, 103, 104, 106ff., 112, 115, 128, 132 n.5, 133, 139, 141, 142 n.50, 159f., 177, 181
 Macrina, 90-91
 Magnentius, 135
 Magnus Maximus, 29 n.27
 Magona, 186
 Mamre, 63, 66, 71
 Manichaeism, 151f., 161

- Marcella, 119
 Marcianus, 183
 Marcus Valerius Gypasius, 49
 Mary, 110-113, 124, 169, 171
 Matifou, 90
 Mauretania, 89
 Maurice, J., 40
 Maxentius, 31, 136
 Maximian, 19
 Maximinus, 11
 Maximus, bishop of Jerusalem, 133
 Melania the Elder, 100, 113, 116 n.75, 119-122, 123, 139, 145
 Melania the Younger, 72 n.78, 120, 121 n.12
 Merriman, J.F., 48
 Milan, 123
 Minervina, 60
 Moses of Chorene, 155f., 176 n.44
 Mount of Olives, monastery and convent on the, 100, 119, 121, 139

 Naissus, 12, 18
 Naples, 51-53, 121
 Nestle, E., 157, 172
 Nicomedia, 11, 16, 21, 42, 56 n.4, 57 n.10, 63, 73
 Nonnica, 90

Onomastikon of Eusebius, 84
 L'Orange, H.P., 193
Origo Constantini, 16
 Orosius, 18
 Ossius of Cordoba, 56 n.4

Palatium Sessorianum, 32-34, 45, 47-48, 59
 Palestine, 3, 35, 55, 57, 63ff., 71f., 87ff., 107, 121, 123, 131f., 136, 139, 179, 183, 186
 Pammachius, 119
 Pamphilus, 98
 Paula, 92, 139
 Paulinus of Nola, 79, 88, 99, 105, 108, 110, 113-116, 117, 119-122, 125, 143ff., 161, 175
 Pequaria, 90
 Philippus of Side, 102 n.34
 Phillips, G., 156
 Philomenus, bishop of Caesarea, 133
 Philostorgius, 10-11, 16
 Photius, 96
 Piacenza pilgrim, 70 n.67
 Pinianus, 120
 Pohlsander, H.A., 62
 Pola, 60
 Pontius Pilate, 79, 92, 95, 111
 Primuliacum, 113
 Procopius, 9, 11
 Prosper Tiro, 17
 Protonike, 147ff., 173, 184
 Publicola, 121 n.12
 Pulcheria, 179 n.57, 183

 Radegunde, Frankish queen, 183
 Reims, 22, 75
 Rome, 17 n.43, 21, 22, 30ff., 37, 42, 44f., 53, 56, 59, 67, 69, 74-76, 87, 119, 121, 132, 147ff., 159, 186
 Rubin, Z., 83ff.
 Rufinus, 79, 96, 99, 100-102, 104-107, 119-122, 125ff., 139, 143, 175

 Saepinum, 50, 53
 Salernum, 50
 Saturninus, 90
 Saul, 167, 180
 Schumacher, W.N., 27
 Seeck, O., 73
 Septimius Severus, 32
 Sibyl, prophecy of the, 105, 106
 Sicca Veneria, 49
 Silvester, bishop of Rome, 23, 37, 177 n.53
 Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem, 173
 Simon Magus, 161 n.40
 Simon Peter, 147f., 150, 154, 159
 Sirmium, 42
 Siscia, 42
 Socrates, 9, 79, 99, 102-104, 107, 125ff., 143
 Sophia, 183
 Sozomen, 9, 61, 79, 99, 104-107, 125ff., 143, 174f.
 St. Maximin, abbey, 23
 St. Paulinus, convent, 24 n.10
 Steidle, W., 109
 Stephen, protomartyr, 167, 169, 178
 Straubinger, J., 157f., 171ff., 177
 Sulpicius Severus, 29 n.27, 79, 99, 105, 109, 110, 113f., 116-117, 119-122, 125, 143ff., 161, 175
 Surrentum, 49
 Sydow von, W., 191

- Symmachus, 110 n.58
 Tarragona, 42
 Thaddaeus, 151
 Theodora, wife of Constantius Chlorus, 15
 n.35, 19, 43f., 52, 62
 Theodoret, 79, 99, 107-109, 126ff., 143
 Theodoric, bishop of Trier, 23
 Theodosius I, the Great, 5, 15, 108, 113,
 123f., 134, 187, 191
 Theodosius II, 179 n.57, 183, 187
 Theogis, 22
 Theophanes, 10
Thermae Helenae, 32-33, 47-48
 Thessalonica, 40, 42, 55 n.1
 Tiberius, 147, 159, 162
titulus, 92, 95, 101, 103, 106, 111, 115, 124
 Tixeront, L.J., 157f.
 Tixter, 89
 Trajan, 173f.
 Trier, 12, 21-30, 42, 44, 73, 189, 191
 Tschira, A., see under Deichmann
 Valens, 96f., 133f.
 Valentinian II, 110 n.58
 Venus, see under Aphrodite
 Veronica, 154
 Vespasian, 136
 Vetiana, 90
 Via Labicana, 30-31, 34, 74f.
Vicennalia, 59, 63, 68
Vita Constantini, 3-4, 13f., 62, 63, 83ff., 97,
 125ff.
Vita Macrinae 90
 Vogt, J., 12, 13, 36ff., 73, 134, 136
 Walker, P.W.L., 87f.
 Ward-Perkins, B., 189
 Wegner, M., 190, 192ff.
 Winkelmann, F., 96ff.
 Wotke, K., 172
 Xanten, 24 n.10
 Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, A.N., 192
 Zechariah, prophecy of, 105, 106, 108, 111-
 113, 124, 161, 171, 176, 181
 Zonaras, 61
 Zosimus, 4, 16, 61